

Slide – mother hen protecting chicks

“Security is our great idolatry today, so we wind up leading timid lives.” Scott Bader-Saye has written on fear and anxiety and how these things keep us from living whole lives. He remembers when he and his wife were preparing for their first child. They explored the advice of the experts of the day, *“What to Expect When you are Expecting,”* and *“Husband-Coached Childbirth.”* Soon they were trying to discern, what was the right thing to do when it came to the time of birth? Should they have the baby at home with a midwife? Should they seek out a doula to assist the mother and attend to her comfort? Should they take full advantage of the modern hospital and put their trust in doctors and nurses? If they go that route there is the question of medication or not. In the midst of all the options with no clear path they wondered what if they made the wrong decision for their child?

They began to notice a lack of cultural consensus about norms and standards for family life. There didn’t seem to be a standard for what was right. Instead there was a lot of information. How could they possibly sort through all of it and know what to pay attention to? Were childhood vaccines safe? Can you allow yourself to sleep or should you be checking to see if the baby is breathing? In the midst of all this anxiety the marketplace would offer solutions around the theme of safety, for a price. To be a good parent you have to create a safe environment. You baby-proof the house with outlets covered, gates installed, furniture attached to the wall, protective padding placed on sharp corners, plastic guards on the stove, drawer and cabinet locks, crib inspected, and toilets latched. Ordinary living became overwhelmed with reminders of extraordinary dangers.

Then parental advice reoriented them. In *Finding Nemo*, the animated feature film explored the themes of risk, safety, and the limits of parental control. In the story Marlin, the father clownfish, having lost his wife and a nest full of eggs to a shark attack, makes it his mission to preserve his only remaining child, Nemo, from all danger. At one point he says to his friend Dory: “I promised him I’d never let anything happen to him.” To which Dory replies, “Huh. That’s a funny thing to promise.” “What do you mean?” Marlin asks. “Well, you can’t never let anything happen to him. Then nothing would ever happen to him. Not much fun for little

Nemo.” A preoccupation with safety can get in the way of living a full and whole life.

What happens when you live out of fear? You begin to think mostly about what you want to prevent and avoid rather than what you want to encourage and develop. Our overwhelming fears need themselves to be overwhelmed by bigger and better things.

In the gospel story for today Jesus displays courage. He is not deterred from his journey to Jerusalem. If Jesus felt terror when he heard Herod was coming for him, it was swiftly conquered by the better things with which he was accomplishing. Jesus declared, “Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow.” Jesus, the one who came to seek and save, the one who came to pour out his love and his life, is not going to abandon his mission because one of the political power-brokers of his day is seeking to snuff out his influence.

“And on the third day I finish my work!” Jesus says. The work of healing a broken world is his work. The work of suffering for the sake of those who suffer is his work. The work of bringing new life and resurrection hope into a world of death is Jesus way. Jesus work is embodying perseverance and courage even when it leads to a cross. In Christ all things will become new.

No matter what the threat, it is not greater than Jesus confidence and trust in the path he is on as God’s beloved Son. Jesus does the work of casting out fear by healing, standing in opposition to the agenda of Herod, and by continuing on to the cross.

Slide – Psalm 27/cross

Psalm 27 is paired with this week’s gospel text. The word of the psalter is similar to the way of Jesus, casting out fear. “The Lord is my light and my salvation; what shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?” There are hundreds of references to fear in the Old and New Testaments. A wide range of emotions are captured in the Hebrew and Greek words for *fear*, from a sense of awe and immense respect to heart-pounding fright.

In the context of Psalm 27 those who bring about fear are slanderers, adversaries, breathers of violence, and betraying relatives. The psalmist does not make light of these threats. The psalmist does not offer simple sayings like, “When the going gets tough, the tough get going.” The psalmist does not encourage those who are afraid to “make lemonade out of lemons.” If there is to be any encouragement, it is to come from outside of the fearful soul. Confident that the Lord is her light, salvation and stronghold, the psalmist asserts:

For he will hide me in his shelter
In the day of trouble;
He will conceal me under the cover of his tent,
He will set me high on a rock.

No matter the severity of the conditions the psalter faces, they are not able to shake the confidence the psalter has in God. The author of the psalm has known God’s faithfulness. Amid deadly threats, the psalmist trusts that he or she will live.

Fear is a wake-up call. It arouses awareness of danger; it puts us on high alert. Yet it can do just the opposite, overwhelming us and diminishing our alertness, like new parents sorting through too much information, or like not standing up for those experiencing hating because of the color of their skin or their faith or their orientation or whatever is seen as differing. Fear stops us, then, from living into the life which God intends for us. Can we do something about fear?

Neuroscience links fear to the amygdala in the lower, primitive brain. This small structure scouts for trouble and in detecting it, sounds an alarm and jerks multiple neural cords. As it reacts quickly to threat, it ignores fine distinctions and uses generalizations. For example, there is a deer suddenly on the road in your path. You hit the brakes. You don’t think about it. The amygdala’s strength is rapid processing and its weakness is lack of precision. When fear is extreme, noradrenaline flushes through the body, producing intense vigilance at first, but then flooding the brain and riveting attention on the object of fear. At this point the fearful person can hardly shift attention elsewhere. Tunnel vision occurs. The ability to be imaginative and thoughtful is overwhelmed. Reality is pruned to the senses, to the synapses mediating fear, to the paralyzing moment. What can pull us back from this powerful response, especially when there is no longer a threat of immediate danger?

The role of the prophet is to cast out fear. The psalmist does this using poetry in service of prophecy, showing a way to change fear into energy, and danger into possibility. The way scripture works is to focus the attention from the scary present to the things that might be. “I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the Living,” says the psalm. In the ancient context where people lived close to the land, the mention of the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living is a strong statement of the kind of salvation God envisions, namely the opportunity to eat and thus live. God will be faithful – “the Lord will take me up.” This assurance is the heart of the gospel. God will not let God’s promises return empty. In Christ all things become new.

When we are of a fearful heart, we forget the plot of the story. God is not only the author of all things, but also the God of promise, of the things that will be. There is a trajectory towards goodness with God.

I was reminded of this strong response to fear when I walked through the Smithsonian Exhibit, “The Bias Inside Us” last week. Many of our initial reactions to people and society are learned from an early age. When we are babies we learn to favor the familiar. As toddlers, the adults around us fill in value gaps subtly communicating the kinds of people who are safe and smart as well as those we should avoid. Children learn about belonging and prefer their “in-groups” while expressing negative attitudes toward “out-groups.” As adults we tend to confirm the examples of things or people that align with our preexisting notions and stereotypes while discarding things that counter or challenge our world view. We naturally have bias. To be accepting of others different from us takes real work on our part if it was not learned at an early age.

Conversation between Dr. Tessa Charlesworth, a psychologist at Harvard and Dr. Kwame Appiah, an emeritus professor and author.

A child lives in a culture, learns all these labels, incorporating all that is there, their environment. They are not just passive recipients of their culture. They live what they take in.

But Bias can be taught with malicious actions, intentional actions.

Song in *South Pacific* – “you’ve got to be carefully taught, to hate all the people your relatives hate.”

Examples in the world of the creation of negative bias, building a negative picture of the outsiders, others: Pol Pot in Cambodia; Armenian genocide; Holocaust; Rwandan genocide; Negative ideas about the essence of other people. Sometimes its people of other races. These are powerful social processes. They can be on a large scale as with nations and peoples or on the small scale in our everyday relationships.

For example, the cool kids mobilize against the uncool kids – Dr. Appiah says when this happens “We need to be alert to the possibility when somebody is saying the sorts of things people say in a stigmatizing, negative way about outsiders, we need to be alert to the likelihood that a) it is not going to be true, these are going to be lies about the other people, and b) they are doing it for a reason, they want to mobilize us to pursue an agenda they have.”

Power-brokers count on being able to appeal to our fears. They count on getting others to be paralyzed by threat. The world needs an alternative word, alternative way. Through the centuries the psalms have been refreshment for those bowed down. Psalm 27 is one I have used countless times and I have seen how the power of the word has given hope in a time of distress. According to brain imaging, the amygdala responds powerfully to calm words, gentle touch and faces. All of these lower the reactive response of the amygdala. Human presence and voice are resources for “new creation.”

We have a word for those of fearful heart, “The Lord is your light and your salvation. What is there to fear?” God is a God of good things today, and of good things that will be.