

Read lesson: Luke 4:1–13

Let us pray: O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our rock and our risen redeemer. Amen.

“You will not fear the terror of the night, or the arrow that flies by day,” the psalmist promised, “or the pestilence that stalks in darkness, or the destruction that wastes at noonday.”

Lent invites us into the deeper waters of our faith. We begin a journey this morning, that will lead us to a big city where a young teacher and healer is arrested on trumped-up charges, tried before a kangaroo court in the middle of the night, and summarily executed on a Friday afternoon on a hill near the city’s garbage dump.

Lent is the time when we think about the central, defining affirmation of our faith, namely that God was in that drama, in that innocent death, in that suffering; and that the whole story is not so much a tragedy as it is the very good news of God’s saving love. Lent is a time to walk for a while with Jesus as he moves slowly, relentlessly to his destination on the cross.

In times past, Christians did that by sacrificing, by “giving something up for Lent.” In the early church, for instance, believers fasted daily until 3:00 p.m.

Writer Nora Gallagher describes walking into an Ash Wednesday service and remembering how hard it was to give up smoking, which she did one Lent. A friend of hers quipped earlier that day, “Anne’s giving up drinking, Terri’s giving up chocolate, and I’m just giving up.”

Traditionally on this first Sunday of Lent, the story is remembered and retold of Jesus in the wilderness, tempted by Satan. The Spirit of God leads him into the desert for forty days and nights. It is a frightening place, lonely, dry, arid, windy; a place where a man could panic, break down, go mad.

I’ve always imagined the wind howling out there, almost like a ghost, and Jesus shivering, cold, uneasy, frightened. God leads Jesus into the desert and leaves him there alone, with his fears.

Centuries before, the same thing had happened. Moses led God’s people out of their slavery in Egypt. Then they faced the waters of the Red Sea and, on the other side, wilderness: desert, danger, the unknown.

And even more, 600 Egyptian chariots were bearing down on them.

Hebrew scripture says, “In great fear the Israelites cried out to the Lord. They said to Moses ‘Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?’” They were scared to death, terrified. And Moses said, “Do not be afraid. Stand firm and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today.”

Fear is a major topic in the Bible, mentioned no fewer than 300 times. Walter Brueggemann says you can summarize the whole Bible in two words: “Fear not.”

The 91st psalm, with its dramatic images of threat and danger—the terror of the night, the arrow, pestilence, and destruction—promises that there is nothing ultimately to fear: “Because you have made the Lord your refuge . . . no evil shall befall you.”

I once attended a lecture Walter Brueggemann was delivering. Brueggemann is one of the preeminent Christian thinkers of our time. I sat back with pen and pad in hand, expecting a scholarly dissertation on some arduous topic. Instead he began by asking every one of us to put down our pens and recall a time when, as a young child, we were frightened, lying in bed at night, sure that the shadows on the bedroom wall were of a burglar at the window, or a monster, and the bumps and creaks on the stairway surely a warning of something horrible about to happen. A time we called out to our moms or dads out of the darkness, in our fear, who then appeared and took us in their arms and said, “It’s OK. Everything is all right, I’m here. Don’t be afraid.”

That, Brueggemann said, is the fundamental, primary, and consistent message of the Bible: “I’m here. Don’t be afraid.”

We’re all born with fears, and by and large they serve us well. We have a built-in fear of falling, for instance. And I have observed over the years that we have a built-in fear of abandonment. These days, when my daughter, Erin, places 10 month-old Harper into my arms, she is not very happy at first. She looks worried, maybe even terrified; she watches Erin carefully, to make certain that she is not being abandoned.

In an essay in the *Christian Century*, Peter Steinke says, “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.”

With extreme fear, concentrated adrenalin floods the body, producing “intense vigilance, riveting the brain on the object of the fear. Now the fearful person is barely able to focus on anything else. Tunnel vision occurs and fear takes over” (“Fear Factor,” *Christian Century*, 20 February 2007).

Fear is a powerful motivator and a very real market force. Fear sells home security systems and car alarms. Fear of violence motivates people to buy a gun for protection, ironically substantially increasing the possibility that it will be used to wound or kill a family member.

In the dark days of the Great Depression, with the forces of aggressive fascism moving across the world, American people were afraid. And President Franklin D. Roosevelt reminded them that the nation did not have to live out of its fear. “The only thing we have to fear,” he said, “is fear itself.”

Good Night and Good Luck, the motion picture about the broadcast career of Edward R. Murrow, is set in a time in our history when the nation was very much caught in the grip of fear. Senator Joseph McCarthy had convinced many people that there were Communists everywhere: in the universities, the churches, the entertainment industry, the government, and even the military. Careers and lives were ruined: Constitutional liberties were threatened. Anyone who questioned or dissented was suspect. A few courageous voices were raised in opposition. One of them was Edward R. Murrow, who said in 1954 at the height of the fear and frenzy, “We will not walk in fear. We will not be driven by fear into an age of unreason, if we dig deep in our history and remember that we are not descended from fearful men, not from men who feared to write, to associate, and to defend causes that were, for the moment, unpopular.”

I continue to ponder the irony that to the degree that we live out of fear, the people who attacked us have won a great victory. To the degree that we are motivated by terror and not our great and abiding values as a nation, terrorism has won. To the degree that we act out of fear and not out of our commitment to justice and kindness and compassion and peace, a great tragedy has happened to us above and beyond the 2001 attacks themselves.

Personal fear is like a prison. It oppresses and limits and confines us. Fear of failing convinces us not to venture something new and risky.

In the classroom, fear of humiliation prevents a bright student from raising her hand. Fear of ridicule keeps a passionate young man from speaking his mind. Fear can keep us confined to one place, never risking, stretching, reaching. Someone once said that if Michelangelo had been afraid of heights, he would have painted the Sistine Chapel floor.

Fear of rejection even prevents us from saying, “I love you. I need you. I want you.”

Peter Gomes says that “fear, not sin, is the curse on human life, and that when Jesus Christ frees you from your fear, your fear of death, you are literally given your life back.”

Because that is the final issue for us, is it not—this final fear? What theologian Paul Tillich used to call the “anxiety of non-being.” What is the “terror of the night” if not death, our own death.

The promise of faith is that there is nothing to fear.

“When they call me, I will answer them,” the psalmist promises. “I will be with them in trouble.”

Or, as another psalm so beautifully puts it, “Even in the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.”

The late John Carmody, professor of religion and prolific author, found himself at fifty in a life-and-death struggle with multiple myeloma. He wrote a little book of his experience, *Psalms for Times of Trouble*.

He wrote:

In the dead of night
I hear the furies howl

Have mercy on me, O God. . . .
If you are a strict accountant
I shall always end up in the red.
So be more than accountant.
Be my helper, my lover, my friend.

I need someone on my side
someone who will never let me down.

Professor Carmody wrote, “If God holds our hand, then even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of darkness, we may fear no evil,”
And near the end:

For me to be
is to be in you
to feel
is to feel toward you
to be quiet
is to flow toward your rest.
(pp. 159–173)

So we end where we first began, with the words of the Psalmist:

“You will not fear the terror of the night or the arrow that flies by day, or the pestilence that stalks in darkness or the destruction that wastes at noonday.”

Faith in Jesus Christ, trust in the God and Father of Jesus Christ, the God of us all, is summarized in the words “Fear not.”

Fear not the terror of the night.
Fear not terrorism.
Fear not the future.
Fear not the new job
Fear not the end of the old job
Fear not the end of the relationship
Fear not the risk of a new relationship
Fear not the move to a new place
Fear not the threat of failure
Fear not sickness
Fear not surgery
Fear not death itself.

The promise of God is that we will never be abandoned. The dearest, most precious promise of God, God’s covenant with us, is made on the cross through Jesus Christ: that man living and dying like us, for us, with us, God—going all the way for us. Amen.

