

# THUNDERSHIRTS

## Part 2 of *Take a Breath*

Isaiah 41:10, I John 4: 13-19, Matthew 8: 23-27

July 16, 2017

Rev. David S. Cooney

If you were to guess which phrase, short sentence, appears in the Bible the most, what would you say? God loves? Love God? Love thy neighbor? God is great? God is good? These would all be good guesses. They also would all be wrong. The most used phrase, short sentence, in the Bible is, "Be not afraid." Parents, think how often over the years you probably said to your children: don't be scared, don't be afraid, don't be frightened, no need to fear. Well, God has continually said to God's children: be not afraid.

This is proof that fear is a big part of the human experience. No matter how courageous we may be, or think we are, there is plenty that frightens us.

Now fear in itself is not a bad thing. In fact, it serves a useful purpose. Think of it in the same way we think of pain. On the surface, it seems silly to say that pain is a good thing. Oh, I hurt. All right! I hope I have more pain. Ridiculous. Pain does, however, get our attention and tells us that something is wrong so that we can take appropriate action. For instance, we might hold onto something so hot it is damaging our hands if we could not feel the burning. We might lift something heavy to the point of damaging our knees or backs if our knees and backs did not feel pain and shout enough.

Fear can help in the same way. We do not like being afraid, and constant fear can be as debilitating as chronic pain. Fear does, however, often prevent us from doing stupid or dangerous things. You do not have to have a phobic fear of heights, for instance, to feel your pulse quicken if you get too close to an edge, or stand on a ladder that feels unstable, or cross a walking bridge that sways too much. Good! Otherwise, you might say I can get a better picture if I just lean a few more feet over this rim, or I can reach that part of the gutter without having to move the ladder. OK, some of us do that anyway, but reasonable fear stops most people from carelessness. We do not install a metal flagpole during a thunderstorm, or stop to text on railroad tracks, or jump into deep water if we cannot swim, or pick up snakes we cannot identify, or pick up snakes we can identify.

This is because of fear and it is a God-given warning system. We have been wired to sense danger and the signs are unmistakable. Our breathing becomes shallow and more rapid, our pulse quickens, our palms become sweaty, and our legs may begin to shake. In a second we can shift into a fight or flight modality. This healthy fear can keep us safe and alive.

The problem is that fear can stop being a warning system and become a controlling system. What we do or don't do, how we act, how we interact can be controlled by fear. This is because the danger-sensing part of the brain is linked to the imaginative part of the brain which means, when our imaginations run wild, so does fear.

I am not talking about different phobias such as a fear of heights or a fear of water or a fear of spiders. Actually, fear of spiders is not a phobia. It is just common sense. I suspect these

connect in some way, but a psychologist or psychiatrist would have to speak to that. I'm talking about the vague fears, the fears we cannot fully put our hands on but control our lives to the point of making life difficult. I'm talking about things like fear of failure, or fear of rejection, or fear of tragedy, or fear of aging, or fear of insignificance, or fear of the other. These are the fears that keep us from trying anything, or from engaging in relationships, or accepting the physical stages of our lives and making the most of them, or even going outside our homes except when absolutely necessary. We imagine all of the ways we can be harmed and all of the ways we can be hurt, and the warning system goes haywire.

It is like the smoke detectors in our homes. They are meant to be a warning system in case of fire or smoke. But when there is a short circuit, or the batteries wear out, they can go haywire. Now that they are often wired together, they all can get going when there is no fire. By the way, is there some reason why smoke detector batteries only go bad between one and four in the morning? Is there a rule or something?

Well, our warning system can go haywire when our imaginations get working. There is an interesting study done by Chapman University that shows that the things people fear correlate to what is most prevalent on the news. For instance, if the news is about a series of terrorist attacks, regardless of where in the world they happened, there will be a rise in people fearing being the victim of a terrorist attack. This is true even if they live on the plains of North Dakota where few terrorists hang out. A news report about a riot leads to people fearing they will be caught up in a riot, even if they live in an exclusive, gated community. I was listening to a sermon by Adam Hamilton, pastor of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Kansas City. He talked about when he was traveling in Europe how people, who learned he lived in Kansas, told him they would never visit Kansas and could not believe he would live there. When he asked why, the answer was because of tornados. They wanted to know how many times his home had been destroyed by a tornado. When he said never and that he had never even seen a tornado they were unimpressed and their opinions did not change. They had seen tornados on the news so they were not going to Kansas. When our imaginations get going, fear ceases to be a helpful warning and instead controls our lives. One person has written that fear stands for False Events Appearing Real. When this happens, fear does not protect us or save us. It paralyzes us and immobilizes us and steals the joy from life.

This, undoubtedly, is why God works so hard in scripture to reassure us. In our lessons we have examples of imagined fear and what we might call reasonable fear. God calls for the same response in both: faith.

The imagined fear is seen in Isaiah. In this part of the book, known as II Isaiah, the prophet is focused on the restoration of Jerusalem and Israel following the Babylonian Captivity. To make a long story short, Babylon had conquered Judah and destroyed Jerusalem, and many residents were exiled to Babylon. This captivity lasted for fifty years. It was a devastating experience in every way imaginable. But now Babylon had fallen and the exiles were free to go home and to rebuild.

Good news, right? Yes, but also scary news. They had been away a long time. They had gotten used to life in Babylon, even if they were not happy with it. Going back and rebuilding

included many unknowns. They had just been through a terrible experience, and they were not all that excited about risking it again. Their imaginations conjured up all of the things that could go wrong, all of the ways they might be hurt, all of the terrible things that could happen. Like the child who kind of wants to go on the roller coaster but can see how fast it is and can hear the screams of those riding it, they kind of wanted to go home, but not really, and most did not for quite some time. They were paralyzed with fear.

Ah, but like the parent who tells the frightened child, don't be afraid, I will ride the roller coaster with you, God told the immobilized people, "Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand." Essentially, God is saying to the fearful, "I am with you. You can trust me. No need to fear."

In the gospel lesson, Jesus and the disciples are in a boat crossing the Sea of Galilee. Jesus, exhausted from a long day, fell asleep. The wind came up and the sea became choppy and the boat began to swamp. The disciples feared for their lives and woke Jesus asking him to save them. Jesus was unimpressed by the wind and a little perturbed at their panic. He said, "Why are you afraid, you of little faith." Well, excuse me. They were afraid because the boat was about to sink, and it was a long way to shore, and they were not certain they could swim that far in choppy water. This is what I call reasonable fear. They had not stayed on the shore imagining all that might go wrong on the boat. They were on the boat, and the storm was real, and the possibility of capsizing was very distinct.

Interestingly, though, Jesus did not think their fear was all that reasonable. Why? Because he was with them. After all that they had seen, after all that they had experienced, after all that they had been through together, did they really think that he would let them drown? Maybe they did. In Mark's version of this story, they woke him saying, "Don't you care that we are about to die?" Instead of being gripped by fear, instead of thinking that Jesus did not care, they could have gently awakened him saying we need a little help here, trusting that Jesus would protect them.

In both accounts, very different situations, the message from God is I am with you, it will be all right. This is true even in death. One deep-seated fear, a fear we seldom speak of, is the fear that maybe we do not have the relationship with God we have claimed to have, and we are not really heaven bound. Part of our fear of death is the fear that we might be wrong on this point. But John tells us in his first letter that God loves us and, if we love God, this is not an issue. We can be bold on that day because of this love. He writes, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear...." In the Hebrew Bible, the gospels, and the epistles, the message is the same. In life and in death God loves us, is with us, and will strengthen us. God is serious when he says be not afraid. We sing when the storms of life are raging stand by me. God says I do stand by you and I am standing by you.

I just recently learned about Thundershirts. I don't know where I have been. Everybody else probably has already known this, like duh, they have been around for years. No matter, this is new to me. Apparently, Thundershirts are available for dogs because thunder frightens them so terribly. The shirt fits them in a way that they feel they are being held and that calms them.

Well, this makes great sense to me. Who doesn't like to be held when afraid? The first thing we do with frightened children is hold them, to pull them tight, to surround them with our arms so they feel safe and secure. We do that with each other, holding a spouse or significant other close, holding a family member close, holding a friend or even stranger close. Groups of people in a frightening situation will huddle together. It is comforting to be held. It is calming to be held.

It seems to me that the words of scripture are God's Thundershirts for us. God's constant reassurance of presence and protection can soothe our nerves and calm our fears. These promises wrap around us like the very arms of God holding us close. If God is with us, what really have we to fear? And God is with us.

Fear is not unnatural and fear is not always bad. It can keep us safe and even save our lives. But fear should be no more than a warning system, a sign to be alert to danger. When it grips us, and affects us, and controls us, then it wrests control away from God and that is a problem. When fear dictates what we think about others, how we think about others, how we act toward others that is a problem. When fear controls what we do or don't do, that is a problem. God does not want us to live in fear. This is why God says so often be not afraid.

I know lots of things are truly scary. Sometimes the wind blows and the waves get high and the boat is close to capsizing. But that's when we want to remember Jesus saying, and I am paraphrasing: "Yo boys, what is the issue? Don't forget I am in the boat with you." These are the times we want to remember God's words in Isaiah, "Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God." That's a Thundershirt worth putting on.

Amen.