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St. Stephens-in-the-Field Episcopal Church

First Sunday in Lent
"Fear Less -- Intro"
Year C
RCL

Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16
Romans 10:8b-13
Luke 4:1-13

Part One -- "Children's Sermon"

(Invite the children to come forward) I'm wondering if any of you here have had a scary dream? Can I see a show of hands if any of you have had one? I'm going to raise my hand too because I still have scary dreams even though I'm a grown-up! I can hardly think of anything worse than waking up from a scary dream at night. It's dark, sometimes there are strange noises you hear, -- as if the dream itself wasn't bad enough. Where do you think your scary dreams come from? Sometimes I might have a scary dream if I watch a movie that has scary stuff in it. Sometimes when I was little I would have a scary dream when my big dumb brother would tell me things that weren't true -- like I was adopted or that our stuffed animals came to life at night. When you woke up from your scary dream what did you do? How many of you pulled your covers up over your head and tried to go back to sleep? How many of you decided now would be a great time to crawl into bed with Mom and Dad? Well, when I had a scary dream sometimes I would get up out of bed and sneak into my parents bedroom -- very quietly -- and see if either of them were awake. It didn't take much to wake up my mother so she was usually awake right after I opened their bedroom door. I usually didn't have to say much or even ask if I could get into bed with them, it was pretty much a matter of just coming to the side of the bed, the covers would open up and I could crawl in.

Well, getting into bed with your parents when you are scared is certainly one way to feel better. They love you right? They don't want you to feel afraid. Yet, sometimes we do. You know, Jesus' disciples used to get afraid as well. They would get afraid when they didn't understand what Jesus was telling them or they would see him do something so incredible they couldn't explain it. Yet, Jesus told them again and again and not be afraid. But Jesus didn't want them to be afraid because he loved them too - - in fact, that's why Jesus came -- so we wouldn't have to be afraid of God, of death or of the stuff that happens to us everyday.

So the next time you're afraid, try really hard to remember how much Jesus loves you and that he is with you and happy times as well as frightening times. Jesus loves you, don't be afraid, he is with you always. (Excuse children to go back to their seats.)

Part Two—"Tall Talk"

When I was a young boy growing up in the Episcopal Church I used to attend St. Jude's in Cupertino. Now, when I was little I used to really enjoy Father John Buenz's sermons. He had these Peanuts 'dolls' for lack of a better word, which he would use to re-create a particular comic strip which would then tie into the message he was delivering that Sunday. He didn't do this every Sunday of course but when he did I assure you it was memorable. I don't have any Peanuts dolls but I do have this: (show picture of Lucy).

You see, Lucy used to have at this booth she would set up on a street corner and for five cents she would offer psychiatric help to the children living in her neighborhood. Charlie Brown was a frequent customer. So let's use our imaginations to eavesdrop on the session between Charlie Brown and Lucy this day. Charlie Brown is troubled, sitting at Lucy's booth and they are engaged in conversation:

Lucy Van Pelt: Are you afraid of responsibility? If you are, then you have hypoglycemia.

Charlie Brown: I don't think that's quite it.

Lucy Van Pelt: How about cats? If you're afraid of cats, you have ailurophasia.

Charlie Brown: Well, sort of, but I'm not sure.

Lucy Van Pelt: Are you afraid of staircases? If you are, then you have climacaphobia. Maybe you have thalassophobia. This is fear of the ocean, or gephyrobia, which is the fear of crossing bridges. Or maybe you have pantophobia. Do you think you have pantophobia?

Charlie Brown: What's pantophobia?

Lucy Van Pelt: The fear of everything.

Charlie Brown: THAT'S IT.

Can you imagine going through life afraid of everything? I would imagine that more people than would care to admit go through life on a day-to-day basis with some kind of fear -- and this could be fear ranging in degree from a sort of low-level dread to outright panic! Are we as followers of Jesus Christ any less susceptible to feeling fearful when the circumstances of our daily living, confound, frighten or perplex us?

You and I are no strangers to fear, frustration, confusion or embarrassment. We know that fear can leave us unable to move, that frustration and confusion can blind us and make us lose our way, and that shame will eat us up. It's hard for us to make progress and we feel like the wind's been taken out of our sails, when it seems like we don't know who we are anymore, when all we want to do is hide. All you have to do is to open up the morning paper or switch on the evening news and the reality of the broken world we live in invades our living rooms with impunity. By virtue of the television, newspapers and the Internet, I know more about homelessness, foreclosures, unemployment, violence in our schools, violence in our communities, our workplaces and most recently in our churches--- than I would have ever dreamed I would! There is fear about our foreign debt, our nation's deficit spending, terrorism, two wars overseas and what all this may mean for our country long-term. We are afraid of growing up, growing old, getting up and falling down. There is no shortage of matters to fill fearful of.

The writers of the Psalms understood this better than anyone. It was not until I was much older until I grew to appreciate the richness and the

teaching of the Psalms. The book of Psalms is quite different in style and purpose from say Deuteronomy or Daniel. Some of the Psalms are songs of praise, others are songs of penitence. But they are songs. Much of what we carry inside of us when we read them affects our ability to relate to them in the spirit in which they were written. What we carry in us also affects our understanding of the author's intent.

The Psalm we read this morning -- Psalm 91 is an exuberant song of faith and the author expresses well not only his praise of God but that his self-confidence is rooted in God and that his entire hope rests in God. He knows that life is difficult -- but he also has a profound faith. Amidst all the troubles of this world he finds that his only abiding security is in the shadow of the Almighty.

So what might be appropriate Christian response be to fear? That is one of the questions that we will be pondering as a community during this season of Lent. The sermon you are hearing this Sunday kicks off our Lenten series, "Fearless". Not only will we be looking at the Christian response to the fear we experience, we will also explore how fear can protect us, and how it can be disabling if we give it too much control in our lives. Throughout Lent we will look at some different sources of fear, and what Scripture (God's Word) has to say about it

Max Lucado, the author of the book, "Fearless", has a great way of putting this into perspective. He suggests one way to look at fear is expressed the title of his book is this: "Fear-Less". I really like this concept. We know that just because we are followers of Jesus Christ it does not mean that we are going to be somehow insulated from difficulties. Mature Christianity understands that life is not meant to be a luxury ride -- it is filled with difficult experiences. But that is not to say that fear cannot somehow be healthy! How about that? Healthy fear. God must have instilled in us the capacity to fear for a reason, right? So one of the disciplines we are called to explore during this Lenten study is to examine as a community this concept of a healthy Christian response to fear. The flipside of this is of course to acknowledge that for every appropriate response to fear there is also a potential inappropriate response that can lead us away from God into sinful behaviors and self-destructive habits.

In the introductory sermon to this series Max Lucado tells of the gospel story where Jesus and his disciples are accosted by a sudden storm on the Sea of Galilee. Peter and John; who were seasoned fisherman, struggled to get down the sail in the midst of rough seas and gale force winds. Matthew minces no words about the force of the storm. He uses the word *Seismos* to describe it. Think earthquake. Imagine a storm coming on so suddenly and so violently that it shakes you to your very core. In the midst of this storm, but disciples are out of their minds with fear. But where was Jesus? Well, we are told that while Jesus was in the boat, "Jesus was sleeping".

Jesus was sleeping? How does that work? We imagine that after a long day of teaching and healing it would only be natural for Jesus to crawl into a protected part of the boat and grab some sleep. But the fact that his disciples are bewildered that he is able to sleep that it leads them to believe that not only does he not care about their safety but also that he is not worried about his own!

"Do You Not Care?" Do you not care that we are dying? Do you not care? They saw Jesus healing all kinds of sicknesses and all kinds of diseases among the people. They saw him heal a leper with a touch and a servant with a command. Do they not remember all that they had seen Christ do? Max Lucado suggests that fear dulls our spiritual memory. It makes us forget what Jesus has done and how good God is.

In your service bulletins, I have enclosed a photo copy of some calligraphy artwork that I have had mounted and framed. It hangs on the wall in my living room. And reads thus: "Sometimes the Lord calms the storm. Sometimes the Lord lets the storm rage and calms his child". It is an anonymous quotation that speaks to me on many levels and is a concept that I return to time and time again especially when I am up against a problem where I am lacking wisdom as to whether I can truly affect positive change in my circumstances or if I am confronting issues I simply need to release to God for a while.

What are the storms in your life that you need to offer to the Lord? What storms appear to be raging out of control for you and how might you release them to God to manage? That is the nature of our loving God. He wants to come along side of us in our troubles, during the times when we are fearful. What might it be like if rather than waking Jesus up during the storm, we see if there is any room for us to join him---slumbering there, calm, peaceful and serene in the stern of that tiny boat? What might that be like?

Amen.