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**Sermons**

Overcome by Fear

Exodus 24:12-18 Matthew 17:1-9

February 26, 2017 – Transfiguration of the Lord The Rev. Kathleen Robertson King

I may as well come clean, and tell you that one of my biggest fears is: RATS. As silly as it may seem, I have a terrible fear of these rodents with the long skinny tails. I don't know for certain when this fear began, but definitely since childhood. While doing my field placement for my social work degree in college, I was working in rural Van Buren county serving people who were very poor, isolated, and lacking support systems, and a new family was added to my caseload. I read the case history, and learned that this family with several young kids lived in a home that was rat infested, and I nearly fainted just thinking about it. Before I went to visit for the first time I spent a few moments in my car getting centered. Eventually, I knocked on the door, was invited in to the warm house with the smells of a cooked breakfast lingering, many young kids, and a very tired looking mom. When I was offered a seat on the couch, I sat at the edge of it. As I sat there, trying to get to know the family, all the while obsessing about the rats that were infesting the house, it's no wonder that when a cushion shifted behind my back, I let out a small squeal and acted as though a snake had bitten me. While the family looked at me with puzzled faces, I was instantly filled with shame. I had been so consumed by my own fear that I had failed to be truly present for this exhausted parent of young children who was living in less than adequate conditions while withstanding the daily trauma of severe poverty. I left that day having learned that more than anything else, fear is really a thief

that robs us of attending to the needs, joys, and creative thinking of the present moment, and sometimes, the people who need us.

And the very human aspect of fear is possibly the easiest place to connect with the story of Transfiguration from our scripture today. After all, it's difficult to make sense of the appearance of Moses and Elijah, long dead heroes of the Jewish faith, it's pretty tough to imagine Jesus' (or anyone's) face suddenly shining bright like the sun or garments that suddenly become dazzling white. Then there's Peter's odd offer to make Jesus, Elijah, and Moses dwellings. And then, hearing God's voice from heaven claiming Jesus as God's son? Pretty fantastical and hard to digest. The story seems much more Hollywood than some others we know well from the Bible. Clearly, the story is significant, because it echoes Jesus' baptism in the river Jordan by John the Baptist, when Matthew 3:17 says, "And a voice from the heavens said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'" While the words spoken in Matthew 17, verse 5 are, "While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!'" The text does not tell us how John the Baptist responded to the words from Matthew 3, but in Matthew 17, the text says, "When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear." And I can't really blame them for this! If I were to lucky enough to stand upon a mountain with Jesus, I can imagine being able to digest the presence of long dead leaders of the faith, but the change in light and the voice of God might well take me over the edge, too. It might be that this story's location could have heightened the sense of worry and doom, too. The text tells us that six days before Jesus, Peter, James, and John made their way up the mountain, "Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem to undergo great

suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” We know also from the text that when Jesus shared these details, Peter was upset and took Jesus aside to tell him, “God forbid it, Lord!” So, it seems fair to deduce that the walk up the mountain with Jesus was shrouded in some amount of fear already. After all, their teacher, friend, and greatest leader had given them a preview of what was to come, and it was not the kind of news received with delight or favor. It meant the end of their beloved’s life on earth, and it pointed to an unknown future for their work and lives without him. It gives me some amount of compassion for these poor dazed and confused disciples. And the text that follows the Transfiguration does little to assuage any fear that might have remained, as it says, “As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, ‘The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised. And they were greatly distressed.’” This after Jesus had cast out a demon and upbraided the disciples for their lack of faith. Given all this, the fear the disciples experienced on that mountain makes more sense.

While opinion differs on this among people, it seems likely that Jesus said some version of “do not be afraid” at least a hundred times throughout the Gospel stories. Clearly, fear has been a prominent human emotion for at least the last few thousand years. As we all know, fear plays an important role for humans. It indicates caution, similar to a yellow light at an intersection. Our brains are functioning in a reptilian or primitive way in the face of fear. The amygdala responds in an instinctive, reflexive way to protect us from threats. This is good, because this instinctive response keeps us safe in a variety of life experiences when we can change our behavior to avoid something that poses a threat to our wellbeing. However, because of the complexity of the human brain,

this benefit can become a stumbling block. While a helpful tool while hiking in the woods where bears might lurk or walking down a dark street alone, we may find fear less helpful in the situations we find ourselves engaged in more often that require the critical thinking that the more primitive parts of our brain are not equipped to do, such as creating systems of compassion and care, and establishing public policy that works for the good of society. Fear is natural and maybe even helpful, but could be limiting, according to Dr. Mary C. Lamia, saying:

From an evolutionary perspective, the emotion of fear protected humans from predators and other threats to the survival of the species. So it is no wonder that certain dangers evoke that emotion, since fear helps protect you and is therefore adaptive, functional, and necessary. However, there is another important aspect of emotions to consider that, in the case of fear, may be important to [decision-making](#) as well as survival. That is, when an emotion is triggered it has an impact on our judgments and choices in situations. In a study of [risk taking](#), participants who were [fearful](#) consistently made judgments and choices that were relatively pessimistic and amplified their perception of risk in a given situation, in contrast to happy or angry participants who were more likely to disregard risk by making relatively optimistic judgments and choices.

So, while fear in a variety of situations is understandable and even a benefit, there are surely times when our brains fear when they shouldn't, leading us to miss out on the fullness of life, reach out in care, or make decisions that limit or play out in damaging ways.

I happen to think that the concept of considering WWJD, that is, "What Would Jesus Do?" to be difficult at best, and dangerous at worst. Placing the life

and personhood of a Jewish man from a time and culture so unlike our own seems wrought with more problems than I can begin to articulate. And yet, as he is our teacher, greatest inspiration, and head of our church, it seems impossible to avoid. Perhaps if we can remember how far apart our cultures, histories, and life experiences are while finding guidance, we can gain wisdom for our lives today. One thing seems fairly sure: while fear is a common theme in the Bible, the messages from Jesus seem to be consistently oriented towards soothing the fears of his beloved, not stoking the fires of them. In our story from today, the disciples were afraid, and according to the text, Jesus immediately **touched them** and said, “Get up and do not be afraid.” Even in Matthew 8, when we hear that Jesus calmed the storm, he asked the disciples “why they were afraid” with a measure of impatience, but I know of no example in which Jesus encouraged the fear of those around him. He critiqued the social order and made no attempts to cloak his feelings about justice, but like any leader worth his salt, he did not seem to be a fear monger. I can imagine the tenderness with which he touched the disciples, understanding perhaps that for many, physical touch provided healing and calm in the midst of anxiety.

There’s absolutely no doubt that we could each articulate multiple things that bring fear to our hearts. We have lived long enough to witness and experience truly dreadful things that incite layers and layers of fear. We grieve the deaths of people we love deeply and fear going on without them, we fear social amnesia leading to the erosion of civil rights, we experience accidents that harm our bodies and dampen our spirits and fear the way forward, we fear the dominant profile of technology and loss of face-to-face connection and the cost to our society, we lose function in our bodies, and independence in our lives and fear being dependent, and constituents on both sides of the aisle fear for our

democracy in an extremely polarized time. And that's just the beginning of a list I devised that surely becomes more particular or representative for each of us.

Last year I heard from a researcher representing the Pew Center on Research for Religious Life that recent statistics show increased prayer among middle aged persons, and I immediately felt a bolt of recognition, and quickly connected my own increase in prayer with the fact that I, like many other middle aged folks, am raising teenagers. I carry so many more fears as a parent now than I did when I could control the smaller world they inhabited. Now I pray more, because it brings me comfort as we navigate these new waters that include car rides in wintry weather with fellow teenagers. As is often the case for me, I glean comfort from Wendell Berry—poet, environmentalist, father, grandfather, and person of faith:

When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
rests in his beauty on the water,  
and the great heron feeds.  
I come into the peace of wild things  
who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief.  
I come into the presence of still water.  
And I feel above me the day-blind stars waiting with their light.  
For a time I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

We stand on the precipice of Lent, a march towards a hill that brings us far less joy than the mountain on which the Transfiguration took place. Rather than Jesus' face glowing like the sun and his garments gleaming white, soon we prepare for a crown of thorns and a scarlet robe as the gospel of Matthew will tell us. It seems necessary then to celebrate this day of Transfiguration, a day when light shines bright enough to encourage us all despite our fears, and a day when

the disciples were overcome by fear, but comforted by the touch and words of Jesus. The same Jesus whom Thomas would recognize in the touching of his side and hands was known to Peter, James and John by the tender touches he gave to soothe them in their time of fear. I invite each of us to face our fears in the ways we can, lest they overwhelm and bind us so that we fail to see Jesus in our midst. If we are lucky, we will have opportunities to let our fears go enough to experience reconciliation. For me, a small opportunity for this arose a few years back while officiating at a Blessing of the Animals. I was accustomed to petting slobbery dogs and tentatively blessing a few meek cats, but suddenly, as I went around the circle touching and blessing these animals, I saw a teenage girl holding her two precious white rats. For a brief moment I considered passing them by, but then I realized that would really mean I was passing by a young woman who loved her animals and had brought them to me for a blessing. With fear in my heart, but perhaps the spirit of Jesus, I was able to place a couple of fingers gently on the backs of the rats, and give them a blessing that meant a great deal to the human holding them. This was not bravery so much as a moment of blessed clarity.

We give thanks for the ways we can bring comfort to the fearful or suffering among us, through compassionate acts and service, knowing that the touch we bring was practiced and taught to us by Jesus, who had considered all the facts, and still approached those around him with hope everlasting and love overflowing, banishing fear. That we may go and do likewise. Amen.