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11/2017 | Monthly Topic

Fear: Opportunity or challenge?

by *Emily Carson*

As a women in her 30s who still sleeps with her closet light on, I am no stranger to fear. Of course, some fears are more rational than others, and my fear of the dark admittedly falls into the irrational category. Is a giant green closet monster really going to be deterred by a lightbulb? Probably not. Is a thief really going to turn around after seeing a sliver of light peeking out from under my bedroom door? Doubtful. Yet without the light on, I can't sleep. And so my room stays illuminated every hour of the night, and my fear of the dark remains.

What are you afraid of?

Fear is a mysterious life companion, isn't it? Some of us are more influenced by its persuasive charms than others. I am afraid more often than I'd like to admit. I'm most afraid of being unlovable. I'm terrified that if I ever get to the core of who I really am and I share that person with the world, she won't be loved ... or even liked. Through conversations with many other young adult women (and men, too), I know I'm not alone in this fear. I'm also afraid of tragedy and sickness and wrinkles. The list goes on and on and mine is embarrassingly long.

Some say that at the core of it all, human beings are most afraid of death. Or we're afraid of being alone. Or, perhaps, we're afraid of failing.

What are all the other human beings on planet earth most afraid of? I'm not so sure that can be boiled down to a perfect, one-size-fits-all answer. I've read many thoughts on the topic. Some say that

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at the core of it all, human beings are most afraid of death. Or we're afraid of being alone. Or, perhaps, we're afraid of failing. All of these answers are probably partially true but not complete. I posted an informal survey online to get some feedback on the topic, and the lists of deepest fears were immensely broad and impossible to generalize.

This exercise led me to conclude that fears are both universal and specific. There are some possibilities in life that scare almost everyone, and there are other, more personal fears that bubble up only for some. It appears that when it comes to confronting fear, in some shape or form, we're all on this journey together.

Left unchecked, fear has a very consuming power. When we let our anxieties run the show, the world quickly becomes a very hostile, energy-draining place. Our brothers and sisters in Texas, Florida and Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands are still rebuilding after hurricanes. The threat of terrorism exists. The threat of nuclear war. Joblessness and insurance coverage. If we're looking to feel afraid, there is no shortage of material to work with. But if we're looking for another option, perhaps there is no better time to kick fear in the pants and start looking through a different lens.

I used to think the answer to overcoming my fears and worries was to force myself to "become brave." I assumed pure willpower would be enough to make me a fearless person. I even created a "30 Days Braver" plan in which I was going to make myself do something outside of my comfort zone every day for a month. This approach was not for me. I made it to Day 2 before changing the plan to "30 Days Inspired." Instead of one stunt a day, I challenged myself to look for daily inspiration through gardening, museums and long walks. Right away, I realized that my true goal for the project hadn't been to start jumping out of planes and climbing pyramids. My goal was to start looking at the world in a different way, to start seeing life as an opportunity instead of a trap.

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That month taught me that life is created to be relished, savored and explored much more than feared.

But like I said, I still sleep with the light on, so I'm no master of overcoming fears yet! We're all works in progress, and I'm thankful for the power of community. We can lift each other up; we can challenge and encourage one another as we confront our fears and live out our lives in peace and love. What follows are a few tools that are helping me along the path of fear confrontation. I hope they will be useful to you, too! My prayer for you, dear sisters, is this: May fear never deprive you of life, may life always lead you to hope, and may hope eternally fill your spirit. Amen.

Name your fears

Many of our greatest fears lose their power and control over us when we name them! Write them down. Share them with a friend. Paint a picture. It's up to you. Watch as fear's power begins to evaporate.

Take time to pause

My wise mother dishes out this great advice on a regular basis. Sometimes my anxieties take over and I forget to take slow, deep breaths. When fear starts to consume, hit pause. Take five deep breaths. When I remember to do this, it almost always shifts my attention to more productive thinking.

Pray fear away

Here's a gem! Prayer! I love that there are basically no rules with prayer. It's just a conversation with God and it can take any form. Prayer calms fears.

Stick with it, but don't get stuck

Exposing and confronting our fears is a lifelong process. Sorry folks, there are no shortcuts. Stick with it. Remember that you are never alone on the journey. Find ways to affirm yourself for working hard and overcoming your fears.

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The Rev. Emily Carson is a curator of curiosity. She currently serves as director of communications for the Southeastern Minnesota Synod of the ELCA. She got married in August and is savoring this new season of life with her husband, Justin, and their dog, Finn.

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Fear in the Bible

by Emily Carson

Fear is a very common theme in the Bible. In the Word of God, we are presented with all kinds of folks: the brilliant, the clueless, the average and everybody in between. There are people who live in constant fear without a chance of overcoming it.

There are people who persevere despite terrifying circumstances. One of the things I love most about the Bible is that many of the emotions it explores are timeless. Being afraid is nothing new to the human experience, and the Bible makes that clear. The Bible also shows us that in the middle of our fears, we are never alone. God is with us. There is such power in this promise from our Creator! I find it fascinating to learn about the various ways God's word tackles the topic of fear, and I hope you will, too.

Angelic Encounters:

The Gospel of Luke

Whenever angels visit humans, their first words are almost always the same. They say, "Do not be afraid." (Well said, angels, well said!) As humans, fear is a common first response to an unfamiliar or uncomfortable situation. Throughout the Bible, angels first calm the anxieties of their listeners so that the rest of their words can be heard.

The Bible also shows us that in the middle of our fears, we are never alone. God is with us.

Angels show up in the early chapters of Luke several times, and each time the initial message is, "Do not be afraid" (Luke 1:13, Luke 1:30, Luke 2:10). An angel visits Zachariah to tell him about the upcoming birth of his son, John. An angel visits Mary to tell her about the upcoming birth of her son, Jesus. An angel visits some shepherds in a field to tell them a message of good news and great joy.

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At the time of these angelic encounters, Zachariah, Mary, and the shepherds were all in the midst of significant life events! It is normal and expected that they would be experiencing some fear. God meets them right where they are and calms their anxieties. God does the same for us. Our Creator meets us right where we are, in the middle of whatever we are facing and says, "Do not be afraid."

I will not be afraid: The Psalms

The book of Psalms never ceases to inspire and amaze me with its relevance to everyday life. The psalms are full of real people expressing what it feels like to be human! There are happy psalms and angry psalms and peaceful psalms. There are also many psalms written by people and communities doing their best to overcome fear.

Psalm 27 is an expression of perseverance, faith, and longing. The writer pleads for God's presence and deliverance from danger. The psalmist also encourages himself and his community saying, "The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?" (Psalm 27:1).

The truth is, we don't always feel brave. We don't always feel ready to confront our fears and struggles. In these moments, we can hold on tight to God's word. We can find verses and stories that remind us that people have been standing up to their fears for a long time. The psalms offer a way to explore both human emotion and the realities of a life of faith.

Fear and perfect love

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the astonishing sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. . . . (1 John 4:7-21)

The love of our Creator is amazing. For thousands of years, God's love has continued to inspire people, providing hope and courage during challenging times. Fear has no power in the light of Christ's mercy and grace. As Christianity grew and spread in its early days, church leaders did their best to teach people what God's love and acceptance meant for their daily lives.

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The first epistle of John is a letter written to early Christians. The author of the letter wants his audience to know that God's love isn't just something warm and fuzzy; God's love is transformative. The theme of the chapter is love, but the writer also touches on the topic of fear.

As a pastor, I often say things like, "God loves you" and "God's love is always with you." Sometimes I talk about God's love so much I forget just how life-altering it really is! 1 John 4 really brings me back to the genuine power of God's love. The author writes, "There is no fear in love. But perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18a).

Our Creator's love is greater than anything that causes us to be afraid. We can be comforted by that certainty! I like to imagine God with a great big snowplow driving up to my heart and mind and plowing away all my fears. Our Creator's love is unimaginably strong, and it has the power to drive out whatever frightens us the most.

The Journey Continues

We've explored only a small handful of the many Bible verses that address the topic of fear. I invite you to continue on your own or with a study group. I participate in a monthly women's Bible study group at church, and I am inspired at the amazing things that happen when the powers of community and God's word are combined! As you continue to expose and confront the things in your life that scare you, I pray the psalmist's refrain will remain in your heart: "With the LORD on my side I do not fear." (Psalm 118:6a).

Discussion questions:

1. What are your biggest fears? How have they changed over time?
2. Is it difficult for you to share your fears with others? Why is it meaningful to share in this way?
3. Fear is a common theme in the Bible. Why do you think this might be?
4. For thousands of years, the psalms have given people and communities a way to express their feelings in the midst of fearful times. How might the psalms be a tool in your personal life? Your family life? Your congregational life?

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