

Jesus & Fear (Part One)

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Introduction

Over the next two weeks we'll discuss something that no doubt plays a role in each of our lives: fear. This week we'll be taking a broader view of fear as the Bible deals with it, and I'm pleased to share that next week Rebeca (our youth pastor) will look at fear through the lens of one particular story in the gospels.

We should say at the outset that our aim is not to answer every question we might have about fear or speak to specific psychological concerns. We do, of course, affirm the wonderful service that therapy and counselling provide. For example, over the past year we've been able to team up with mental health professionals in our church to offer workshops for teenagers and adults alike, which has been a wonderful gift to our community. God cares about our health, mental health included, and what's on offer through specialized training should be sought out when needed and we can help you do that – all you need do is ask.

Our hope, then, over the next two weeks through a reading of scripture and with Jesus in plain view, is to help to put fear in its place, as it were, from a Christian perspective. To ask clearly and simply: How should a Christian think about fear? And what can a Christian do with fear?

Taking fear seriously

Let's begin with the famous and profound opening to Psalm 27:

The LORD is my light and my salvation – so why should I be afraid? The LORD is my fortress, protecting me from danger, so why should I tremble? (Psalm 27.1)

At about age five I saw a film that shook me to my core. "Harry and the Hendersons" was a story about a family who one day runs over a Bigfoot, or Sasquatch, by accident with their station wagon. Amazed, and thinking the creature dead, they strapped it to the roof of the car and drove home. The rest of the movie focused on how the Bigfoot turned out not, in fact, to be dead and caused a benign and loveable kind of commotion around the neighbourhood. The film was designed as a comedy, but I didn't find it funny in the least. The idea of an eight-foot beast lurking in the very forests my family camped in, let alone the neighbourhood I lived in, terrified me. And that's what I think of when I think of being a child and being afraid.

All of us have early impressions of fear. Some impressions are rooted in the imaginary, and others, all too painfully and vividly, are rooted in reality. For some the dark side of our imaginations have become a reality, our worst nightmares made true. But no matter where fear is rooted we all face it daily. The darkness is chilling, the unknown is unsettling, and the world's capacity for all that stirs fear up is deeply troubling. Fear is very present, very real, and shouldn't be taken lightly.

Fear in the foreground

Behind me is a painting from J.M.W. Turner, a 19th century artist known as the "master of light". Turner often painted the ocean and this particular piece is called *Stormy Sea with Blazing Wreck* and depicts a ship on fire in the background with raging waves in the foreground. Chaos on chaos, you could say. Masterful though Turner was with light, what often strikes me about his work is how truthfully he renders the untidiness of things. Turner's world was gritty and raw; no clean lines, no easy answers.

Living in the age of search engines and direct flights it can be tempting to approach the Bible expecting it also to be filled with clean lines and easy answers. But read the Bible seriously and you'll find more grit and mess bursting through its pages than you might care to take in. Along with all of that you'll find lots of stories and talk about fear. But that is not because the Bible is a book about fear, but because it is a book about how things really are. The Bible, you could say, doesn't pull punches. Turn to any place in scripture and you'll hear about what it's like to live in the real world, what it's like to be human, and where God is in the middle of it all. The biblical writers certainly knew as much about fear as we do.

Turn to the Psalms and find poems filled with praise and admiration, but you can't dismiss them as light-hearted worship tunes. They're packed with raw feeling, and crippling fear is part of that honest expression. Turn to Exodus, Deuteronomy or Joshua to meet a recently liberated nation of slaves overwhelmed by the new life ahead of them, the unknown before them. Turn to the Prophetic books to find words written to a desperate community wondering if God had abandoned them in the fog of war and exile. Turn to the gospels to see the disciples so at a loss as to what is going on around them that their teacher has to constantly steady and comfort them. And turn again to that same teacher, faced with his own worst nightmare, sweating, trembling and praying alone in the darkness of an olive grove. Fear is depicted throughout scripture because it was written in and for the real world. And fear in a world like ours, says the Bible, is only natural.

So we should say straight away that there is nothing inherently wrong with being afraid. Fear is the normal response to things that daunt or threaten us. Fear, then, isn't a sin either. Fear is what comes upon us when the lights get switched off, as it were, when darkness enters the room. And the world can be a very dark place.

Switching the lights off

In a way that's what the writer of Genesis says about fear in the beginning. And that's probably a good picture to start with; fear enters the room when humans switch the lights off. Genesis 1 and 2 opens as a story about a giving God, a flourishing world and humans enjoying both. But in Genesis 3 the man and woman become convinced that their "eyes will be opened" (Genesis 3.5) or they will become enlightened, we could say, when they reject the guidance of this loving Creator God. The cruel irony, of course, is that though man and woman are sure they're opening their eyes they are actually closing them. They think they're switching the lights on, when in fact they're switching them off. And so, says Genesis, when God comes looking for the man and woman he finds them hiding and afraid. It's a tragic story, humankind getting lost in a darkness it willingly brings on itself, and we've been dealing with such darkness ever since. Thankfully that's not the end of the story because, as Genesis reminds us, God came looking, and this is a God intent with switching the lights back on.

As we said earlier, the writers of the Bible knew as much about fear as we do, and this goes for the writer of Genesis too. When early on in Genesis we hear about the Spirit of God hovering over deep water, or making light to shine in the darkness, or bringing order to chaos, we're hearing about a God who supersedes things. All things that rightfully made ancient people anxious: deep water, darkness, chaos. So, Genesis speaks of God as being over the deep, bringing order to chaos and shining light into darkness. Such a dominant picture of this being is painted it should come as little surprise that when we read about fear in the Bible, we also hear God's resounding response given his supremacy: *fear not*.

Fear not, because God...

"Fear not" or "don't be afraid", you may have heard before, is the most common instruction in the entire Bible, which says something in itself about God's interest in human trouble. But "fear not" isn't the sort of phrase intended to make us stiffen the lip and get on with things. That's because it's only the first half of what God says to humanity throughout scripture. Here's some examples:

This is my command—be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid or discouraged. For the Lord your God is with you wherever you go. (Joshua 1.9)

Say to those with fearful hearts, “Be strong, and do not fear, for your God is coming to destroy your enemies. He is coming to save you.” (Isaiah 35.4)

But now, O Jacob, listen to the LORD who created you. O Israel, the one who formed you says, “Do not be afraid, for I have ransomed you. I have called you by name; you are mine.” (Isaiah 43.1)

They were terrified but the angel reassured them. “Don’t be afraid!” he said. “I bring you good news of great joy for all people. The Saviour – yes, the Messiah, the Lord, - has been born in Bethlehem, the city of David!” (Luke 2.10)

Don’t be afraid! I am the First and the Last. I am the living one. I died, but look – I am alive forever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and grave. (Revelation 1.17,18)

Now, we’ve just taken quite the journey through five readings over hundreds of years in and out of multiple stories. But the regularity of God’s message to humanity is clear, and this regularity helps us to see the larger story and message at work: Fear not, because God is stronger than trouble. Don’t be afraid, because God is with you. Fear not, because help is on the way. Don’t be afraid, because God has won! *Fear not, because God...*

That’s the other half of the Bible’s most frequent instruction: “Fear not, *because God...*” In other words, the Bible doesn’t sweep fear under the rug, dismissing what’s visceral and valid, but it also doesn’t give fear center stage, ever painting chaos on chaos, darkness on darkness into the foreground. Fear is acknowledged but put in its place. *Fear not, because God...*

That’s also what the Bible means when it says we should “fear God”, which admittedly in our English translations can be confusing language. Fearing God, it should be made clear, is more about revering God than living terror of him. When the Bible speaks of “fearing God” it usually means regarding God more than we regard other possible life controllers. For example, the Bible would lead us to revere or respect God *over* the chaos and darkness, because those things are in the end *not really* bigger or stronger than God. Humans should then “fear God” not because he is someone to be afraid of but because God is *greater than* the sum of everything we might have cause to fear. Darkness and chaos, and the fear it evokes, we could say, can’t be central because they’re not God. But, when they become central, they become an object of

veneration or worship. And nothing, says the Bible, is worthy of that kind of respect other than God himself.

So, scripture encourages, let God fill up the frame, let God come to the foreground of the painting, even if it doesn't seem like there's much room for him there. When the darkness feels as though it's going to envelop your world, let God take center stage.

And that, among many examples, is also what the writer of Psalm 27 is drumming up when feeling hunted down, surrounded, and totally abandoned. When everything is closing in around them:

The LORD is my light and my salvation – so why should I be afraid? The LORD is my fortress, protecting me from danger, so why should I tremble? (Psalm 27.1)

Fear not, because God...

Swallowed up

Now, in the pitch black and the bedlam, everything closing in around us, facing the full force of fear, all this could sound a little trite, too easy, too clean a line. A bit like patting a small child on the head and telling them that God is bigger than Bigfoot and to go back to sleep. But God doesn't do trite or easy, and he doesn't sweep darkness and chaos under the rug.

And it's at that moment, the moment we feel like telling God to *get real*, that we hear the lash of a whip and the jeers of an angry mob. As soon as we're tempted to think that God's not taking the darkness and chaos and our resulting fear seriously we're faced with the most harrowing scene in all of scripture: the gruesome and vexing image of Jesus - God with us - carrying a Roman cross. This is God, in the middle of it all, taking center stage.

The cross is where, realistically, painfully and mysteriously, we see God taking seriously everything we have cause to be afraid of, and taking it head on. The cross is what results when God both acknowledges the problem of darkness and chaos and responds. And his response is to draw it all upon himself, swallowing it up whole as it seems to be swallowing him up. On the cross, at this very moment, the lights go out, as one writer put it, on a naked and brutalized Jesus. And *this* is the moment John's gospel tells us that God's glory, God's character, God's true nature is most clearly seen: Jesus joining humanity in the middle of the pitch black and pandemonium, but also dealing with and defeating it at the same time. Everything we brought on ourselves God moves to bring upon himself.

But just when it seems like darkness and chaos has triumphed yet again, we hear Jesus' shout of victory with his dying breath and last words, "It is finished!" (John 19.30) And if Jesus' death looks like a loss, his resurrection validates the cross as a win. Through the cross and resurrection God doesn't sweep darkness, chaos and our resulting fear under the rug, he swallows it up, and in doing so he switches the lights back on. *"The Light shines in the darkness,"* says John's gospel *"and the darkness can never extinguish it."* (John 1.5)

The climax of the Biblical story is so raw, so shocking, that after Jesus' death and resurrection Mark's gospel basically ends with, "And no one knew what to do with what had happened, or even how to talk about it..." But in light of this raw and shocking story, in light of Jesus, the words in Isaiah and Revelation ring true for us in a new way.

Say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, and do not fear, for your God is coming to destroy your enemies. He is coming to save you." (Isaiah 35.4)

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Don't be afraid! I am the First and the Last. I am the living one. I died, but look – I am alive forever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and grave. (Revelation 1.17,18)

God in the foreground

Emily Bronte, the great English poet, faced death at age thirty. She'd already seen her fair share of trouble (to put it mildly) but retained a stubborn trust in God regardless. Staring the death in the face she let God fill up the foreground in her final moments, she allowed God to take center stage. Now I, for one, wouldn't mind a bit of this kind of boldness, this kind of resilient trust in God. And these words might set us back, but they're meant to – she is a poet after all. What Bronte draws on is her wealth of scriptural conviction about God and reality and fear, and she doesn't mince words:

*No coward soul is mine,
No trembler in the world's storm-troubled sphere;
I see Heaven's glories shine,
And faith shines equal, arming me from fear.*

In response to all this what are we to do with fear? What if we don't feel quiet as armed as Emily Bronte, not so resilient in the storm-trouble, but trembling instead? Two thoughts.

For starters, we shouldn't sweep fear under the rug as our culture often recommends. That message comes in many forms: buy this, watch that, stay distracted, stay busy, ignore the big questions, avoid thinking and talking about darkness and chaos at all costs. Seek out the clean lines, the easy answers. As Christians, the first thing we should do with fear is to *get real*, to name it, to call it what it is with God and with one another. Fear is present, darkness and chaos can sometimes surround us, the sea is raging and the ship is ablaze. But the cross makes space for that, for all the terror, all the anxious thoughts, all the paralyzing pain. And when we look at the cross we remember a loving God who welcomes us to offer him, to lay upon him even, everything we hold as dear and everything we hold in fear.

But once we've named it, once it's been brought into the light, once we've called fear what it is, we should go one step further. With the full story of God and the world in mind, with the empty cross and tomb in sight, we should also call fear what it is not. Darkness and chaos and the resulting fear isn't central, God is. Chaos won't remain forever in the foreground, God is pushing it to the periphery. We won't be swallowed up by the darkness, because God is swallowing *it* up. As Bronte writes:

*There is not room for Death,
Nor atom that his might could render void:
Thou - Thou art Being and Breath,
And what Thou art may never be destroyed.*

As we close today, perhaps we could join with the likes of Bronte, and of Isaiah and John and the writers of the Psalms. Perhaps we could take that very simple phrase and put it into action ourselves, to write it down somewhere and to finish the sentence: "*Fear not, because God....*"

What about God gives you hope when the sea rages and the ship's on fire? What, because of God's love and presence, fills in the foreground? I encourage you to write and finish that sentence this week, and let those words, perhaps even in the middle of the darkness and chaos, ring out with hope. *Fear not, because God...*

I'd like to show you a final painting, this one from Albert Goodwin, another English artist who was heavily influenced by Turner. You'll notice in this piece the grit and mess and lack of clean lines; like Turner's work it's untidy and honest. But you'll also notice what's breaking through it

all, what's filling in the gaps, what's true, what bright, what's shining in a darkness that, in the end, can't overcome it.

The LORD is my light and my salvation – so why should I be afraid? The LORD is my fortress, protecting me from danger, so why should I tremble? (Psalm 27.1)

Discussion Questions:

- What kinds of forms does fear take in our lives?
- What have you typically “done with” fear?
- How does the Bible’s view of fear help as you experience fear yourself?
- How would you finish this question: “Fear not, because God...?”