

# 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

## “Facing our Fears”

8 October 2017—Salado UMC

Preaching Text: Exodus 20:18-21

**“None but a coward dares to boast that he has never known fear”**

**Ferdinand Foch (1851-1929)**

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Hear the day’s lesson for the 18th Sunday after Pentecost:

**When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, and said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.” Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin.” Then the people stood at a distance, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was (Exodus 20:18-21).**

Did you know that The National Geographic Society had a magazine that was called *National Geographic Adventure Magazine*? It was discontinued at the beginning of 2010. In the July 2002 issue there was an article entitled “The Joy of Fear.” Five different people write about the adrenaline rush they got from doing extremely dangerous things. For a few examples: racing at the Bonneville Salt Flats in Utah at 417 miles per hour, paddling a canoe through iceberg alley in Greenland, or dangling off a white-faced rock cliff in a remote Mexican jungle. We now have people in the United States and around the world for whom normal life is so boring and tedious that they need the surge of excitement that a death defying experience provides to make them “feel” alive. Some have called this kind of human behavior—and we now see it in all kinds of television shows—adventure psychology.

Likewise, researchers tell us that about 3.7 % of the U.S. population ages 18 to 54—approximately 5.3 million Americans—has social anxiety in any given year. Social anxiety, also called social phobia, is a disorder characterized by overwhelming anxiety and excessive self-consciousness in everyday social situations. People with social anxiety have a persistent, intense, and chronic fear of being watched and judged by others. They also fear being embarrassed or humiliated by their own actions. Their fear may be so severe that it interferes with work or school—and other ordinary activities. While many people with social anxiety recognize that their fear of being around people may be excessive or unreasonable, they are unable to overcome it. They often worry for days or weeks in advance of a dreaded situation.

So, whether or not fear is self-induced or given to us by our peculiar psychological makeup, we must all face fear one-way or another. Our biblical writers recognized this fact of human life and comprehensively addressed it. In fact, in our Bible’s sixty-six recognized canonical books the terms “fear,” “afraid,” and “dread” occur nearly 500 times (498 exactly, NRSV). Today’s lesson pertains to the Hebrews fear of God and death at God’s hands if the Lord speaks directly to them.

The people are so afraid of Yahweh that they ask Moses to be their mediator so that the Lord God does not need to speak to them directly. It is an odd but predictable that people often ask their leaders to do things for them that they fear to do. Then later the same people cast off the leader’s guidance when it is no longer essential. Moses’ leadership is certainly a case in point.

Here now is the good news about our fear of God. This fear represents a real concern with the Creator of the universe. While the notion of God is not too fearsome, the reality of God's presence is something we ponder, as Paul puts it, "in fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12). In other words, our fear represents our awareness of God's greatness and power. Yet, only by seeing both the awesome and the loving sides of God can we come to a full awareness of God's greatness.

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" both Psalm 111:10 and Proverbs 9:10 tell us. The "fear of the Lord" chiefly describes the awe that people ought to have before God. Although it does carry overtones of judgment, those who fear, or better "respect," the awesomeness of God are persons who grasp the Lord's providential power for God's creation. [*60 Minutes: Hubble Telescope*]. The wisdom book of Ecclesiastes puts it nicely at the end of the writer's musings on life and death. S/He writes: "The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep God's commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone" (12:13).

Fear is a part of every human life. Fear energizes us. Fear helps us stay alert to danger. Fear thereby is a necessary emotion or sensation for survival. Yet, as we have seen already in our mention of "social anxiety or social phobia," fear can debilitate. We all fear different things. Most of us fear our money running out before our life does. Some people fear retirement; others fear for their current jobs. People are in constant worry about their loved ones and this is doubly true for our anxiety about our children—regardless of their ages. We all have worries, and they do influence our lives. They can paralyze us into inaction, or worse, they can even spur us to inappropriate and unfortunate action. If you don't believe me think back to some of our social anxiety created by the predictions of our neighbors and friends concerning the self-induced apocalypse we called Y-2K.

For most of us it all comes down to trust. Either we trust that the Lord will provide or we don't. For Christians there is no other alternative. Only by trusting the God who created all and will bring all to its conclusion can we forge our way through this life that God gives as a great and wonderful blessing. To trust in God or not to trust in God: that is the question!

Fear is real and has been with us at least as far back as Genesis 3:10, when Adam "said, 'I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.'" Aesop once told a fable that goes like this:

**Long ago, the mice held a general council to consider what measures they could take to outwit their common enemy, the Cat. Some said this, and some said that; but at last a young mouse got up and said he had a proposal to make, which he thought would meet the case. "You will all agree," said he, "that our chief danger consists in the sly and treacherous manner in which the enemy approaches us. Now, if we could receive some signal of her approach, we could easily escape from her. I venture, therefore, to propose that a small bell be procured, and attached by a ribbon round the neck of the Cat. By this means we should always know when she was about, and could easily retire while she was in the neighborhood."**

**The proposal met with general applause, until an old mouse got up and said: "That is all very well, but who is going to bell the Cat?"**

**The mice looked at one another and nobody spoke. Then the old mouse said: "It is easy to propose impossible remedies"** (*The Fables of Aesop*, selected by Joseph Jacobs, Macmillan, London, 1979, pp. 159-160).

One the other hand, a healthy fear keeps us alert to the great risks that make creative life possible. These words of verse make this attitude of healthy fear clear:

**It's not exactly courage  
If you're not a bit afraid  
To climb the towering mountain  
Or descend into the glade.  
But this is really courage,  
At least I call it so,  
To say, "I fear that mountain,  
But just the same, I'll go" (J. Wallace Hamilton, sermon *The Anatomy of Courage*).**

Our remedy for fear is simply our faith and hope in the love of God who loved us enough to create us, but also loved enough not to leave us like we are. To live the "fear of the Lord" is to have wisdom that the creator will sustain us to the end and then receive us into our eternal and divine home. Fear also propels us to become the people God created us to be. Amen.

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