

Do Not Be Afraid  
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14:24

Recently I heard a nightly news report about fear in America. I was only half listening and figured this was the latest report on terrorist attacks, murders, assaults, and the like. So I was surprised to hear the reporter relate that the number one fear of the American people is public speaking. First of all, I had no idea that I'm basically Wonder Woman every Sunday. Second of all, what? Admittedly, I turned up the volume and did some research and this is really true according to the National Institute of Public Health, The Wall Street Journal, Psychology Today and plenty of other sources.

The fear of public speaking or glossophobia tops the fear of spiders, snakes, closed in spaces, heights, and flying which are always near the top of the fear list. The fear of public speaking even surpasses the fear of death, which is number two. So we are more afraid of speaking in public than dying in America. Comedian Jerry Seinfeld remarked, "In other words, at a funeral, the average person would rather be in the casket than giving the eulogy." [1]

Glossophobia is hardwired into our systems. We human beings are big on groups; we are social animals. Early humans were hunted by predators and a common defense became living in groups and collaborating to survive and avoid becoming a midnight snack. So this whole notion of having to be out on your own and perform for a group triggers this deep-seated fear of rejection, vulnerability, feeling defenseless, and being thrown to the wolves. [2] There's safety in numbers and we all need swimming buddies in our lives.

The fear of public speaking can be debilitating though. To overcome this fear, advocates remind us to not expect perfection from ourselves, to avoid equating public speaking with our self-worth, to avoid being nervous about our nervousness, and to avoid trying to memorize every word or reading anything word for word. [3] In doing research on glossophobia, related ads and articles kept surfacing on my computer about speech coaches, avoiding presentation anxiety, life coaches to lead you to success. No wonder we're so terrified with this kind of pressure we put on ourselves!

Think of the marvelous movie *The King's Speech* about King George VI of the United Kingdom. The poor man stuttered and stammered and it was severe enough that any public appearance he made filled him with fear as soon as he stepped up to a microphone. He worked with an unorthodox speech and language therapist, Lionel Logue, who helped him handle his stutter and they grew to be friends. Logue was always present at King George VI's speeches he made throughout World War II. But "the royal stammer" remained an embarrassment for the royal family. David Seidler, who wrote *The King's Speech*, was even asked to wait until the Queen Mother died before the Logue family made Lionel Logue's notebooks available to Seidler to then develop the film.

So fears—fear of public speaking, fear of death, fear of spiders, fear of snakes, fear of heights, fear of closed in spaces, fear of flying. We all wrestle with fears on some level. What is it that makes us so afraid? What are you afraid of?

In Cynthia Rylant's book of poems, *God got a Dog* she imagines God as a person like any of us, and in one poem contemplates God going to see the doctor. God is depicted as an older man in a hospital gown, holding his chest and peering around an exam room door. The doctor can't find anything wrong with God except a little skip in God's heart. The doctor tells God it's probably nothing, but advises Him to eat more fish anyway. And then Rylant writes, "The skip

had started way back, when He first heard that some people didn't believe in Him. It scared Him. Still does." [4]

These lines should give us pause. Is it possible that God gets scared? Does lack of belief in God really make God's heart metaphorically skip a beat? We tend to anthropomorphize God. We make God have human attributes and personality traits because that's the way humanity has often tried to understand divinity. Even in today's story of the Transfiguration in Matthew's Gospel, God has a voice and speaks. God calls Jesus God's "Son," depicting a parent-child relationship. God gives instructions as any good parent or authority figure tends to do, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased: listen to him." [5] We don't want to think of God as aloof or unfeeling, as having no idea what the human condition is like. So God is often depicted as having human emotions, God is jealous, angry, and loving--but we don't really hear that God gets scared. Maybe it would be too human for God to possibly have to deal with fear like the rest of us.

We certainly know the disciples were afraid. Even Jesus was afraid in the Garden of Gethsemane. Luke tells us that Jesus prayed in anguish for God to remove this cup from him, "yet, not my will but yours be done." [6] I truly believe that Jesus wrestled with fear in the Garden that night. Today we see real fear when the disciples react to God's instructions and this holy moment on the mountain by falling on the ground. Matthew tells us that Peter, James, and John "were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.'" [7]

Remember there's also that time when the disciples and Jesus are out on the Sea of Galilee and they're in the boat and the windstorm kicks up and the waves are crazy and the disciples are terrified that they're about to die. Jesus meanwhile is asleep in the back on a cushion and wakes up, saying, "Peace! Be still!" Then he turns to his terrified followers and says, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" [8] Then there's that time that Jesus gives a long set of instructions in John's Gospel near the end of his life and half of them seem to address the disciples' fears, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." [9]

Over and over Jesus addresses the disciples' fears. Being afraid is all over the Bible. You would be hard pressed to find any Biblical book where everyone is fearless throughout the whole story. Think of the 23rd Psalm, "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me." [10] Fear seems to be part of our humanity. Admitting we are afraid and trying to overcome whatever scares us with God's help is what people of faith constantly attempt to do. The disciples dealt with fear. Jesus dealt with fear in the Garden for sure. And maybe God deals with fear just like the rest of us. Who knows? Would it be so terrible to think of even God having to overcome fear?

Speaking of overcoming fears, one of my favorite spiritual writers these days is Lauren Winner, a Professor of Christian Spirituality at Duke Divinity School. Winner converted to Christianity and went through a hard divorce and she intertwines her personal story with humor, insight, wisdom, and deep faith in her books. In *Still: Notes on a Mid-Faith Crisis*, Winner speaks about a period of drought in her spiritual life. Though not the same as fear, she struggles with anxiety. She writes, "Anxiety has been my close companion, having long ago taken up residence in the small, second-floor bedroom of the house that is my body. Sometimes my anxiety takes long naps. Sometimes it throws parties. But I don't imagine it will ever tire of this neighborhood and move out for good." [11] Jokingly one of her friends suggests that she give up anxiety for Lent, and she does--and it's not easy.

Lent begins on Wednesday. The Confirmation class and I will lead our Ash Wednesday Service at 7:30 in Pilgrim Hall, and I hope you'll come. We have a few more days to think about what

we might give up and maybe what we'll take on to observe this holy season. But wouldn't it really be something if we gave up our fears for Lent? Wouldn't we be more open to God, to one another, and to ourselves if we asked fear to move out for awhile or maybe forever, so faith and hope and love and grace can move in? May it be so, Amen.

[1] Jerry Seinfeld, as quoted by Donna Pinter, Ph.D., "The Number One Fear of the American Public," October 2, 2011, <http://newsitem.com/news/the-number-one-fear-of-the-american-public-1.1210946>

[2] Glenn Croston, Ph.D., "The Thing We Fear More than Death" in Psychology Today, November 28, 2012, <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-real-story-risk/201211/the-thing-we-fear-more-death>

[3] Preston Ni, "Five Tips to Reduce the Fear of Public Speaking," in Psychology Today, November 6, 2013, <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/communication-success/201311/5-tips-reduce-the-fear-public-speaking>

[4] "God went to the doctor," in Cynthia Rylant and Marla Frazee, *God got a dog*,

[5] Matthew 17:5, NRSV.

[6] Luke 22:42, NRSV.

[7] Matthew 17:6-7, NRSV.

[8] Mark 4:40, NRSV.

[9] John 14:17, NRSV.

[10] Psalm 23:4, NRSV.

[11] Lauren Winner, *Still: Notes on a Mid-faith Crisis*, 82.