

## Fearful August 26, 2007

You may have heard the story about the passenger in a taxi who leaned over the seat to ask the driver a question. He tapped the driver on the shoulder, and the driver screamed, lost control of the cab, nearly hit a bus, drove up over the curb, and stopped just inches from a large plate glass window. For a few moments, everything was quiet in the cab, and then the still shaking driver said, "I'm sorry, but you scared the daylights out of me."

driving a cab. I've been driving a hearse for the last 25 years." That would probably scare even the most fearless of us!

Being scared to death can cause all kinds of reactions. An unexpected tap on the shoulder or a sudden loud noise can cause us to jump. There's a commercial on TV for some business that has people casually talking while they're driving in a car. All of a sudden, a car comes out of nowhere and collides with them! I jump every time I see that commercial, because it always takes me so by surprise.

There are many times experience fear. If you've ever been on a plane that unexpectedly lost altitude and had the oxygen masks drop down out of the overhead panel, I suspect you've experienced fear. Those of us who've been through near-misses when driving a car can relate to the sense of fear that can grip us. Whenever we've failed at something, we're often afraid to try it again, fearing the same thing will happen.

The reality is that all kinds of situations can produce fear in us, and we probably respond to that fear in a number of different ways. Some of us experience a rush of adrenalin, and we move into action. Some of us scream or yell, or perhaps even swear. Others of us freeze and become unable to move a muscle. There's a whole range of responses we have when we're frightened and fearful.

Now there are times when fear is a helpful emotion, as, for instance, when we warn children not to touch a hot stove or not to play with matches. While they aren't yet aware of it, we know they can be badly burned by a hot burner or severely injured in a fire. In a way, we want them to be a little afraid in terms of respecting the possible danger that could occur. This is a form of healthy fear.

A lot of people are afraid of snakes, and I like to think that's probably a healthy kind of fear to have. I have to admit that I'm not terribly fond of those creatures, even though I know that 90% of them are more afraid of us than we are of them, and that they really won't hurt us. Nonetheless, there's something creepy about a snake to me. They make me shudder and turn the other way as fast as I can.

My Mom was afraid of snakes, so I have always I sort of blamed her for passing that fear on to me.

A lot of us probably have some fears that are not grounded at all in reality. We do that when we allow our imaginations to go wild to the point that there are monsters in the dark that we're convinced are real. In fact, someone once wrote, "**Fear is the wrong use of imagination . It is anticipating the worst, not the best that can happen.**"

That's what happens when we start playing a game of "what if" with ourselves. What if this doesn't work out? What if I don't get that job? What if I can't pay my rent this month? What if people really knew what I'm like? What if I fail? We recite our "what if's" endlessly, and we begin to become immobile. ~~The frightened passenger apologizes~~ often get paralyzed, unable to take any action, unable to move any direction.

I had a friend once who really wanted to get into a specific profession, but it required some graduate work to do so. He had had a tough time in his early college work, and had actually dropped out because he wasn't doing well. He was so afraid to try again that he stayed stuck in some unrewarding jobs, never taking the first step to move a new direction, never daring to give that challenge another try. He was filled with disappointment, but could never overcome his fears enough to take one little step toward achieving his life's dream.

I wonder sometimes if many of us aren't living in fear much of the time. In fact, I've even wondered if we aren't living in a culture of fear, especially since 9/11. When the bridge collapsed over the Mississippi River in Minneapolis a few weeks ago, one of the very first reports and some subsequent talk show conversations centered around the possibility that this was a terrorist attack. It wasn't until several days later that the reality of our neglected infrastructure became identified as the probably cause. Nonetheless, many were afraid.

The bottom line is that, when we become paralyzed by our fears, we quit living. We just cower away, trying to protect ourselves from anything bad happening. We're too afraid of what might happen to step out of what we believe to be our safety zone. But, let me tell you, there's not such thing as complete safety; it simply doesn't exist. Frankly, the most hazardous thing we can probably do is try to protect ourselves from all the things that could possibly happen. It's an impossible, frustrating task.

Now, I have to be honest with you: this has been a difficult message for me to put together, probably because I've spent many years trying to discard many of the fears I carried around with me. As a kid, I was afraid of storms; I was afraid of not getting good grades; I was afraid of not being good enough. I was afraid to travel; I was afraid to fly. I spent a lot of time being afraid.

Then I became aware of how much my fears were dampening my capacity for living and enjoying

life. In fact, I can tell you where I was when I made a conscious decision not to continue to live that way. I was on a ski slope in Colorado. Typically, I was afraid the whole time that I'd get hurt, so took forever getting down the hill. I went so slowly, no one wanted to ski with me! I couldn't help it, I said. All I did was look just a few inches ahead of me, or I was stopped forever, looking up the hill, making sure no one was going to plow me down.

Then one day, as I was stopped along the side of a run, I happened to look out over the snow-covered mountains, and it took my breath away! I had been so petrified of falling that I had missed the real joy that was imbedded in that spectacular scene! On a clear Colorado day, you can literally see for miles! It was gorgeous, and I knew and felt the incomparable majesty of God's creation! I felt God's presence.

That's when I made a conscious decision that that was what God wanted me, and all of us, to see and experience—the wonder of life, the beauty of the world around us, the thrill of trying some new adventure and making it! I began to realize that it was highly unlikely that I'd get badly hurt even if I did fall. The greater tragedy was to waste precious moments of life being afraid of what might happen; that was life-depleting, and I decided that wasn't what God wanted for me, or for any of us.

Now, I'm not here to tell you that my heart never races, and that there aren't moments when I'm frightened by one thing or another, but when that starts to occur, I try to quiet those fears with the words of our Bible passage for today. They're words the prophet Isaiah writes, words that God is offering to the people of Israel and to us.

This is how our version from The Message puts it:

**“Don't panic—I'm with you!  
There's no need to fear for I'm your God.  
I'll give you strength; I'll help you.  
I'll hold you steady, keep a firm grip on you.”**

To me, those are words of comfort and hope. God will never desert us. We don't have to face the fears of the world alone, because God is always with us...wherever we are, wherever we go.

A guy named Dave told a story about being scared to death when he was lying on his bed at night. He said he would stare at the closed curtain of his bedroom window, frightened beyond words of what might lie beyond the window. He would never open the curtain, because he was just certain some horrible monster would jump out and get him. He got to the point that he was so scared that he was paralyzed with fear, and would lie there crying until his parents heard him and came to comfort him.

He said it wasn't until much later that he figured out that all he had to do to get rid of those unreasonable fears was to pull back the curtain.

I believe that's God's presence can supply us with whatever we need—courage, hope,

strength—whatever—to pull back the curtain, and face our fears. When we do, we will be able to walk toward a new, exciting future.

Closing:

Paula D'Arcy, in her book *Seeking With All My Heart*, quotes a friend who said, **“You choose each day whether or not your life will be given over to fear.”** And, indeed, we do make that decision each and every day. I'm convinced that, with God's help, we can say, “No, I'll not give in to fear. I'm going for life!” I hope and pray that's so for each of us.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace.  
Amen.