

Detail:

1-19-20 Sermon "What Was I Scared Of?"

We all know what phobias are, right? Phobias are fears - the things we're afraid of, the things that scare us. And there are A LOT of different things that people are scared of. I did a little research, and here are some of the most interesting ones that I found:

Phasmophobia AKA Spectrophobia: The fear of ghosts. And if you're afraid of ghosts, who you gonna call? Ghostbusters!

Pyrophobia - the fear of fire. A natural fear that can be debilitating.

Hydrophobia - the fear of water. I don't think you could be a firefighter if you had either of these phobias.

Anatidaephobia - the fear of ducks - that fear somewhere, a duck is watching you! That one just quacks me up!

Pogonophobia - the fear of beards, or of bearded men.

Now here's one I learned about not long ago - see if this makes sense to you.

Aibohphobia - fear of palindromes, or words that read the same forward or backwards...like Aibohphobia

And then there's:

Triskaidekaphobia – The fear of the number 13

Coulrophobia - the fear of clowns

Kinemortophobia - the fear of zombies

Xenophobia - the fear of other people or of anyone or anything that is strange or unknown.

We hear this word in the news a lot.

Chronophobia - the fear of time moving forward or fear of the future or of what's to come. Some of you may be experiencing this right now because you don't know where this message is going!

And from our story today, there's Trouserverdephobia - the fear of green pants. (yeah, I made that one up - the rest though are real. I found them on the internet, so they MUST be true)

Peoples' top 3 fears according to the website fearof.net

1 Arachnophobia – The fear of spiders affects women four times more than men (48% women/12% men).

2 Ophidiophobia – The fear of snakes.

3 Acrophobia – The fear of heights.

Fear, of course, is nothing new. In Scripture there are countless stories of people being afraid. In fact, nearly every time an angel shows up in a story, the angel tells the person they're meeting, "don't be afraid." Apparently angels don't really resemble the cute little cherubs we see on Valentine's card, nor do they resemble lovable old Clarence from "It's a Wonderful Life!" In the Garden of Eden story, after Adam and Eve had eaten the forbidden fruit, they hid in the Garden, and when God came, Adam told God that they were afraid. Fear is a natural instinct - we're all afraid of something.

Even Jesus showed some signs of fear. In the second scripture passage we read today, Jesus is in the Garden the night before his crucifixion. At this point he's pretty sure what's likely to happen to him, and in his prayer he expresses his fear of what lies ahead. "Father, if it be your will, remove this cup from me." That is, if there's some other

way to do this can we go that way? If there's a way to do this without my having to die, can we try that?"

In our story, the Creacha (we never learn its name) is afraid of a pair of disembodied lime green pants that seem to be able to move around on their own, go where they want to go, and do anything the Creacha can do, which, I suppose, would be a bit unnerving.

The Creacha's initial response to these scary pants is to run - to try to get away from them. That's what we do when we're afraid - we run, we hide, we try to get away. Whether we're afraid of some thing, of a strange place, of a person or a situation, our natural tendency is to try to get away, to run, to escape, or to hide in some way. It's a perfectly natural reaction.

Now, some suggest that fear is the opposite of faith. Let's think about that a little bit, because I think it depends on what you mean by faith. For some people, faith means simply believing, or believing in. It's a mental exercise more than anything - giving mental assent to an idea. I believe in...gravity. Well, that's not much of a leap is it. It doesn't take much to believe in gravity because we experience gravity all the time, it keeps us grounded instead of floating in the air.

If we quit "believing in" gravity, would that make gravity go away? No, of course not. Whether there are ghosts or there aren't ghosts, our believing or not believing in them isn't going to change anything. So, whether we "believe in" something or don't "believe in" it really has no impact on whether that situation is real or true.

I always think about faith as more about "trust" than about "believing in." The word that is often translated as either "faith" or "belief" in

scripture actually more accurately translates as “trust.” So I have faith, I trust, that gravity will hold me to the ground. It’s not about whether or not I believe gravity exists - a main component of “believing in” - rather, I assume gravity exists because I experience it every day and I “trust” that it will continue working.

I don’t merely “believe in” God - I assume that God exists because I see all of creation as proof of God’s existence. My belief in God is a “trust” that God is present in all things, all places, all people, at all times. So, there’s not a sense of fear that is somehow tied to this idea of faith for me. My trust in God does not allow for a fear that God is not present, just as my “believing in” or not believing in God would have no impact on the reality of God. At the same time, even though I trust in God, there are still things that scare me, or frighten me sometimes, so I’m not sure I see fear as the opposite of faith.

In our story, the Creacha finally comes face to face, or face to pants as it were, with its fear. It had been running and trying to escape its fear, but finally in the nine-mile-wide Snide field, the Creacha is confronted with its fear - it can no longer run away. It must face its fear.

In the Scripture, after Jesus prays that God take this cup away - that is, that Jesus not have to face crucifixion - Jesus also faces his fears. Instead of running, he remains, and awaits his fate, trusting in God’s presence.

In the other passage, we see the disciples afraid that the thing they saw walking across the water was a ghost. They had spectrophobia, or phasmophobia, right?

But as he approaches, Jesus tells them, “don’t be afraid, it’s me, Jesus.” And then they recognize him and invite him into the boat with them. In another version of the story, Peter asks Jesus to invite him out of the boat to walk on the water with him. And it says that Jesus does invite him, and that Peter steps out of the boat and initially is able to walk on the water. But then he looks down, sees the water, becomes scared (that is, he quits trusting) and he begins sinking and Jesus has to reach out and save him from his fears.

Fear is a powerful driver of our behavior. I know people who are afraid to drive on the freeway because of the traffic and the speed that the cars travel. In fact, when I was with Kmart and worked in Zanesville I worked with people who had NEVER been on the highway - when they traveled to Columbus it was on side roads only. In my last appointment on the west side I encountered people who had never traveled off the west side of Columbus - adults who had never been east of High St. I know people who are so afraid of heights that they won’t even go near a window when they’re in a tall building. I know people who are so afraid of getting up in front of people that they sweat so profusely that it literally drips off them, forming puddles under them.

Fear can prevent us from reaching our full potential, from living into who God created us to be. Perhaps there are places we’d like to go, people we would like to get to know. Maybe we sense that God is calling us to serve in some new capacity, but our fear holds us back.

Maybe it's a fear of the commitment - perhaps it's a fear of the unknown. We realize there's more to life, but fear stands in the way of pursuing it.

Theologically speaking, if we DO think of fear as somehow opposite of faith, then to confront that fear we must understand that faith as trust provides us with the discipline, confidence, and courage to move forward in spite of our fears. Our faith-as-trust reaffirms for us that God is ultimately present in our lives. It's been said that there is no place safer than in the center of God's will.

Thus, if we're confident that we're pursuing the will of God, we can also believe/trust that our fears, though real, ought not to paralyze us, ought not to keep us from doing what is right.

So what does it take to overcome our fears? Well, we have to face our fears to conquer them. I talked earlier about firefighters - do you think firefighters are afraid of fire and what it can do? Do you believe firefighters are courageous, are brave? Of course! Does that mean that they don't have fear? Courage is not the absence of fear, courage is acting in spite of our fear. It's facing our fear and going ahead and doing what we know needs to be done.

Dr. Seuss helps us to understand that the secret to overcoming our fears is not to run faster or farther in the opposite direction. That only enables us to avoid our fears for a little while longer - and even to allow them to grow - but not to overcome them, not to conquer them. The only way to overcome our fear is to face them. Perhaps you've heard that the best way to get rid of an enemy is to make them your friend - this was Abraham Lincoln's desire in the Civil War. When his

advisors wanted him to be ruthless in destroying his enemies, he asked, “Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?” The same can be said of our fears. The best way to overcome our fears is to make them our friends.

This is what the little creacha in the story did, although it was not by choice that he ended up face to face with the green pants. He started yelling and screaming, shrieking and howling. Was this the end?

“But then a strange thing happened.

Why, those pants began to cry!

Those pants began to tremble.

They were just as scared as I!”

The next thing you know, the little creacha has a new friend: a green one with two legs. In facing his fear he discovered that it wasn't as bad as he'd thought.

In fact, he didn't need to be afraid at all.

We need to hear that message again: we cannot overcome our fears by running from them or avoiding them. “Be not afraid,” scripture tells us. In fact, those words translated variably as, “be not afraid,” “fear not,” or “do not fear” are the most common phrase in the bible. It's found something like 365 times throughout scripture - that's one invitation to trust and not be afraid for every day of the year! How much more do we need to hear it?

But consider, what might happen in our lives, or in the church, if we, too, faced our fears instead of running from them? Might it free us to do things we've always wanted to do, always thought we *should* do, but were afraid to try?

This past week, sixteen leaders from across the United Methodist Church, working under the guidance of the famed mediator, Kenneth Feinberg, released what they call “A Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation” that would finally, after nearly fifty years, five decades, more than two generations, bring to an end the ongoing battle over LGBTQ rights and ministry within the United Methodist Church by offering a pathway to separation - a divorce. I’ve shared with you since I arrived my belief, my trust, that whatever happened with the General Conference work that has been done previously and that will be done in 2020, that a moderate to progressive expression of the United Methodist Church that is open and welcoming to all and that also respects the broad theological diversity found in the church would survive all the political machinations. That is what will happen if this protocol is adopted at General Conference. This proposed legislation would allow for those at the extreme conservative end of the theological spectrum, those who call themselves “Traditionalists” and are unwilling to remain in a denomination that includes those of centrist, moderate, or progressive beliefs, to leave in order to start a new denomination - something they had already been planning on for years anyway. It also provides a way for those at the other extreme to depart as well. The churches that choose not to depart would remain as the United Methodist Church, and this protocol would then begin the process of making changes to the Book of Discipline to allow for both the full inclusion of our LGBTQ brothers and sisters in all aspects of ministry and the life of the church, while also respecting that not all people are of one mind on these issues, even as we commit to being the church together.

Passage of this legislation is not certain.

This just becomes one more of a number of proposals that will be offered to the General Conference for consideration in May in Minneapolis. The difference between this offering and the others, though, is that while each of the other proposals comes from one particular interest group at one specific point on that theological continuum, this proposal was put together by key players from within all of those groups, from conservatives and liberals, clergy and laity, gay and straight, male and female, black and white, American and non-American, younger and older; and it was approved unanimously. All are ready to be done fighting and, like Paul and Barnabas in the Book of Acts, go do the ministry that God is calling them to do in the ways and places God calls them to do it.

This is not an easy thing to do. The way forward will not be easy. In fact, parts of it are scary for some of us. But I trust God is in this. If God weren't in this, then why would Ken Feinberg, a renowned negotiator and observant and practicing Jew, volunteer his time and services to help us United Methodists work through this?

I trust that God is with us - as a denomination certainly - but also here as a congregation. We are not all of one mind on this, or perhaps, any issue. But that doesn't stop us from loving one another, caring for one another, and being the church together, with and for one another and our community.

Change is always difficult, more so for some than for others. Changes in direction, changes in leadership, changes in weather! Change always brings with it some trepidation. I've been blessed to be your pastor for six months and three weeks now, and that has been a huge change for you as a congregation as well as for our family. We've already gone through some heavy stuff together, and I know

that God goes with us as we continue to journey together. We cannot allow our chronophobia, our fear of what is to come, keep us from effective Christian ministry - preventing us from being Christ's disciples. Rather, God calls us to have faith, to trust that the God who brought us to this place will also get us through it, together. Fear limits our ability to reach our potential as individuals and as the church. The church was not created to be a passive institution, but a proactive one. Christ did not call us to sit in our living rooms and watch TV, to be content with only having *our* personal affairs under control. Rather, Christ calls us to go out into the world to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, to bring justice to our communities, and to look after the least, the last, and the lowliest. We cannot fulfill this calling if we are paralyzed into inactivity by the fear of getting hurt, of making mistakes, or of getting involved in messy or complicated situations. Likewise, we can't fulfill God's call in our lives if we aren't open to the idea, don't have faith or trust, that God might be doing a new thing here, a new thing in the United Methodist Church. Yay, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil. For thou are with me. Thy rod and thy staff - they comfort me.

So what are you afraid of? What's holding *you* back? What's keeping *you* from being all that you would like to be, or all that God is *calling* you to be? Once you've identified your fears, you must face them. Talk about them. Seek advice. Seek God in prayer. Find others who've had the same or similar fears and have overcome them, people, who have found that moving forward in faith resulted in the realization that fear is often more imagined than real.

The little creacha in our story, as a result of facing his fears, not only got his old life back, but he also gained a new friend. The disciples, in facing their fears, built the church. If, in the midst of their fears, they

can build the church, can we, in the midst of ours, BE the church for all God's children? Jesus Christ, in facing his fears, saved the world. Don't keep running away. Trust that God is with you, that Christ stands beside you - beside us. Faith will win out over fear every time, because Christ's promise is that he will be with us always, even to the end of time. And Jesus Christ keeps his promises. What Were We Scared Of? Amen.