



Date: October 30, 2016

Title: "War on Terror, Part One: Close Call!"

Scripture: Matthew 17: 1-8

Description: Americans are experiencing an epidemic of fear. Responding to the disciples' terror, Jesus responded in four ways to lift them out of their fear. This response provides a nutshell form of how Jesus responds to us.

It feels to me that Americans are enduring an epidemic of fear. I realize this is the day before Halloween, but I don't believe spooks and goblins are the source of what is causing our fear. Maybe fear just goes with the pre-election season. Politics is dominated by fear, with each party and each candidate describing what terrible things await us if the opposing candidate is elected. The phrase "War on Terror" implies fear is something you can somehow kill. I'm not so sure. In fact, I believe that, like certain germs within our body that actually contribute to our health, a certain level of fear is a good thing. In some ways, fear discloses our love.

But the kind of fear we're living with these days certainly doesn't feel like a good thing. It feels like chronic fatigue or an ever-present low-grade headache. Let's look at fear in its exponentially most intense form: terror. I know you've been afraid; have you ever been terrified? The couple of times I recall both involved my children being in danger. I'm not going to share the details, because I don't want to relive them. And if you've ever been terrified, you already know how physical it is: that twisting screwdriver at the base of your stomach, that trembling shiver under your lower spine, that drying of the throat and tightening of the chest, the instinctive slow shaking of the head and the glazed staring of the eyes that says, "Oh...my...God."

Peter, James, and John went there in a heartbeat that afternoon. They followed the Jesus they thought they knew up a mountain trail. There, suddenly, they wondered if they had really known him at all. His face changed, and his clothes became a dazzling white, so that it was hard to look at him. Then they saw the Old Testament creak open and Moses and Elijah walked out, not as preserved historical wax figures but as prime-time prophets as they parked themselves on either side of Jesus. Then a big cloud came over like a flyover at the Super Bowl and the sky started speaking—that's right, the very sky started speaking—about being Jesus's Father. The disciples

did the only thing that made sense—they dove under the covers, because they were scared out of their minds.

Which isn't always a bad thing. Fear itself isn't an enemy. It's an emotion that identifies what we love. The quickest way to discover what or whom someone loves is to find out what they are afraid of. We fear because we don't want to lose what we love. We fear intensely when we love intensely or when we think what or whom we love is in real danger. So a world without fear wouldn't be a good thing, because it wouldn't be just a world without danger—it would be a world without love.

You think back on times when you've been really afraid, and they were awful times, but in some ways those moments of fear are periods when you feel most fully alive. Why do combat soldiers hold reunions decades later? Not to refresh their memories of how horrible it was, but to tell stories of brotherhood and heroism and recall how alive they felt. When you feel death or danger is near, the people with you suddenly matter a lot to you, and the people you already care about suddenly become very important and you want to squeeze hands or hold people close and tell them what you need to tell them. After years of forgetting or ignoring or even neglecting them, you want to put into words what you realize has been true all along. Maybe afterwards you and they wish that a lot more of life could be like that.

On the mountain, the disciples saw things that terrified them. That voice that said, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him."—they thought they knew Jesus. They knew he was something special. He'd been named MVP (Most Valuable Preacher) two years running and was surely headed for a Nobel Peace Prize. If it were now, he'd have tee-shirts and You Tube videos and he'd have appeared on all the late night talk shows. But this wasn't that celebrity, rising-star Jesus. Clearly the whole presence and power of God was in Jesus that day. Whenever you have a close encounter with the true God, it's more than unnerving; it's often terrifying. Jesus was the point where the closest humanity had ever come to God met the closest God had ever come to humanity.

The disciples weren't fools. Their legs turned to jelly. All the tightening of the stomach and heightened awareness and the slow-motion time kicked in. They were looking at the nature and destiny of humankind and God straight in the face. Their knees buckled and they were face down in the dirt, begging to be spared.

Look at what happens next in the story. This is what Jesus does about fear. Let's watch closely; maybe people remembered this story because it wasn't just a one-time event. Look what Jesus does about fear. Four things.

“But Jesus came and touched them, saying, ‘Get up, and do not be afraid? (Matthew 17:7)

First, Jesus comes to the disciples. No shouting from afar, no issuing edicts from above, no criticizing or judging, no embarrassing, no squeezing the emotions from the moment to manipulate. Jesus comes to the disciples. Did you know that in the Bible, the words “came down” occur 114 times. In the Old Testament, the “birds of prey came down” (Genesis 15:11). The daughter of Pharaoh came down to...the river.” (Exodus 2:5). Fire came down so often the government declared a no burn policy. But in the gospels, Jesus is the one who came down. As one of our recent Christmas carols celebrates, “He came down that we might have love.” Jesus comes to the disciples. He makes the journey across their fear.

Then, second, it says that Jesus touched them. Did you notice that? He *touched* them.

I’ve told some of you about traveling alone across the country by Greyhound bus from Knoxville, TN to L.A. I was twelve, sent there to help my older brother move back home. A twelve-year-old, across country, alone. That was a different America. But twelve-year-old boys haven’t changed much, so somewhere outside of Dallas I lost my ticket. In Dallas I was scheduled to change busses, but I couldn’t do that with no ticket. I had the remains of a sack lunch and a few dollars for meals.

As the sun set, I became a serious Bible-reader and a prayer warrior. Late in the evening, the driver motioned me to come up front. I told him what had happened, and even in the dark I couldn’t hide my fear. “Step down there,” he ordered, motioning to the stair well at the bus door. I glanced at the sign ordering, “No passengers in front of the white line,” but he shrugged, “It’s dark. No one will see.”

He told me about being in the army in Korea, about getting separated from his company and about hiding behind enemy lines for three days. We talked until almost midnight when he pulled the bus into the station. He thanked me for helping him stay awake. After the other passengers had disembarked, he walked me to the ticket master and had a duplicate printed for me.

I never learned his name. But in the years since, I’ve grown to realize who he was. That was Jesus, disguised as a Greyhound bus driver. That Jesus didn’t come to me in my fear, which would have been awkward at 65 mph, but he invited me to come near him, with the same effect. That day on the mountain, Jesus made the journey across their fear and he held them in the midst of their terror, by touching them.

Only then, third, does Jesus speak. First thing he says is “Get up.” That’s interesting. The disciples are clearly still petrified. But Jesus has come to them and they’ve felt his touch. Now it’s time for them to get up. Jesus encourages them to get up while they’re still frightened. Does that say something to you? *Jesus invites them to get up while they’re still frightened.* He knows they’re scared. But, scared or not, it’s time to get up. The disciples begin to realize that what they dearly loved is not genuinely threatened. Jesus is beyond anything they had imagined and is closer to them than they had known. That’s a lot to absorb, but the best place to do it isn’t face down on the ground.

Then, fourth, Jesus says, “Don’t be afraid.” Which by now, after the first three things, doesn’t really need to be said. Jesus has come to them, touched them, and raised them to their feet. They look up and see what was there at the beginning of time and what will be there at the end of time: nothing but Jesus, nothing but God’s life shaped so that it is present to us. What they were afraid of turned out to be Jesus, as everything, everything in all creation, will ultimately turn out to be enveloped in Jesus. And Jesus was there to touch them, raise them, and send them on their way.

Now, that is a story that happened one time only, on a mountain halfway across the world, thousands of years ago. Or it is a microcosm of the whole Jesus story. The whole gospel is encapsulated in that one single verse, “But Jesus came and touched them, saying, ‘Get up and do not be afraid.’”

The whole story is right there, and it begins with the disciples frozen in terror. So if you’re afraid these days for our nation, for your future, for anyone who is important to you, then hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus comes to you. Jesus touches and holds you. Jesus gently puts you back on your feet. And Jesus says to you, “Don’t be afraid.”

Amen.

*The material for this sermon, with a few minor adaptations, was taken from *Be Not Afraid: Facing Fear with Faith* by Samuel Wells, published by Brazos Press in 2011.