

Life on the Great Adventure: Be(e) Not Afraid

Good morning! Today we're continuing our series, Life on the Great Adventure. We're digging deeper into the life that God has created us for, designed us for, and desires us to live. Last week, we talked about Beginning as Beloved. The core idea was that from the very beginning, God has loved us as one of his very own children. In fact, that's how we begin on the great adventure--beloved by God. And we can love others that way too--from the very beginning. Today, we going to look at something in our lives that can keep us from the great adventure. In fact it's something that can stop us before we even get started: *fear*.

Now the aspect of fear that I want to look at today is that fear can block us from leading the life that God desires for us; our fears can keep us from living the great adventure. This past Tuesday night, around 11:15, Caitlin and I were turning off the TV and heading to bed. I was putting away a few things in the kitchen, and Caitlin walked in and said, "We have a problem." Now she said the same thing the night before--and there was a praying mantis on the wall in the hallway. So, expecting something like that, I said, "Okay, what is it?" "A very large bee is on flying around the light in the hallway." "Okay, a bee. I'll go kill it." So I left the kitchen, expecting a yellow jacket or a bumble bee, and when I got to the bottom of the stairs, I looked up--and I saw it. It was not a yellow jacket or a bumble bee--it was a hornet. A very large, size of your thumb, hornet--which very quickly flew into the bathroom. So I walked up the stairs, closed the bathroom door, and went right back to the kitchen. "Caitlin," I said, "we have a problem." So we did anything, we decided to Google search it. "How to kill a hornet." There wasn't much about how to kill a hornet. Mostly, the advice went like this: get some hornet spray, make sure it will shoot 15 to 20 feet; shoot it, and run for your life. Because when they sting you, they can sting, and sting, and sting again. Well, after reading this, I didn't even want to go back upstairs again! We didn't have hornet spray--and it was 11:30. Caitlin was ready to sleep downstairs--and call Roger Dickens in the morning. I didn't want to try to kill it, but neither didn't I want to sleep on the floor. So, summoning all of my courage, I decided the hornet would have to go.

But before plunging into the deadly deed, I was going to protect myself. I put on a pair of jeans over my pants. I grabbed Caitlin's long bathrobe and put that on. Then got my heaviest winter coat, and put that on. If this guy was going to sting me, he was going to work for it. Then I went and got a shoe--a heavy shoe, with just enough flex to give a nice swat. And I made my way slowly into the bathroom. There he was, perched on the fan. Perfect. I went closer--but backed out, back in the hallway. I wasn't ready--and I couldn't miss. After a few deep breaths, I went in again. I got closer, within a few feet, and SMACK! He didn't die on the first hit, though, he only hobbled to the ground--so I hit him again, and killed him, and pulled a muscle--but the hornet was dead. So I took off my coat and bathrobe and jeans, and went back upstairs, and slept in peace.

Now, why do I tell that story? Because what happened on a small, funny level there, happens in big ways in our lives. We were so afraid of that hornet, we didn't want to go upstairs. Forget sleeping in our bed, or even brushing out teeth, we didn't want to go up the stairs. And it wasn't that the hornet kept us downstairs, but it was our fear of the hornet kept us downstairs. Our fear can block us from the life that God wants us to live. Our fear can block us from the life we want to live. When has fear blocked your path?

In our gospel reading this morning, from the book of John, we find the disciples locked in fear. Now, this is happening right after Jesus has risen from the dead. It's the day of his resurrection, and Mary Magdalene had come to the tomb to find Jesus, but he was gone. So she went and got Simon Peter and the other disciple, and they went to the tomb--and they found Jesus gone. And after that, they went back to their homes. So, it's evening on the very first day of Jesus' resurrection, and where are the disciples? They are huddled at home. The scripture says, "*When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house were locked for fear of the Jews...*". Jesus had risen--but here the disciples were locked in the house because they were afraid.

Now we might have been afraid too. The disciples could easily have been arrested, tried, and executed--conspiring with a would-be messiah. And now that Jesus' body was gone, and they could easily be accused of stealing the body. So a locked house might have been a good hideout. But notice this. It doesn't say that they were in a locked house because because the police were coming to arrest them, or because people were accusing them of crimes. It says they were in a locked house because they were afraid. It was their fear that was keeping them locked up. When has fear kept you locked up?

When I read this this week, I kept thinking of it symbolically. I kept imagining as the lock on a door, keeping me in an an emotional or spiritual room, shut off from the world. I was reading this week that among the many deep fears that face, fear of criticism is one of the most common. The fear of criticism that fear that no matter I what I do, even if I do my very best, I will be criticized for it. And that criticism will make me so feel ashamed that I would rather do nothing at all--stand on the sidelines, keep the status quo. No new challenges, or new experiences, no pursuing the dreams. Because the fear of criticism is too great.

Of course, that's not the only fear we face. We all face different fears that keep us locked up. There are a whole host of them--not the least of which is the fear of death, which haunts all of us in different ways at one time or another. These fears, when are they are so intensely felt, can keep us locked up. They can block us from the full life that we want to live and that God wants for us. This is what God wants for you: God wants peace. In any circumstance, in any situation, in any challenge, God wants peace for you. These are some of the most common words that God speaks to his people: peace be with you, or be not afraid. When the angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon, the Lord said to him, "Peace to you, do not be afraid." When Daniel saw an angel of the Lord, the Lord said, "Peace to you." And when the angel appeared to Mary, he said, "Do not be afraid." And this is the core idea of this message--that God's gives us his presence to be with us always to give us peace, and to help us overcome our fears.

When the disciples were locked in this room, it says that Jesus came to them and said, "Peace be with you." He didn't just say it once, but he said it twice, "Peace be with

you.” You see the presence of God is not something to be afraid of, it’s not like a ghost or a haunted house--it’s a source of peace. When Jesus is standing there with the disciples, God is with them, and their fears subside. The disciples find peace when they are in the presence of God.

And that is why God gives them his Holy Spirit to always be with them, to be a constant presence. After Jesus says to them “*Peace be with you,*” he then breathed on them and said, “*Receive the Holy Spirit.*” The Holy Spirit is the very presence of God, and it’s given to the disciples as a gift--to be with them always. The disciples were able to leave that locked room and live the adventure God had for them, not just because God’s presence was with them in the house, but because God went with them into the world. God’s Holy Spirit goes with us in every step and phase of our journey. As we seek to love like Jesus loved, and live like Jesus lived, God’s Spirit is with us. God’s Spirit is with us on our journey, to bring us peace, to give us courage to live and not be afraid.

Now in the time we have left, I want us to look at a couple of concrete ways that we can get in touch with God’s Holy Spirit. It is available to us in times of need, to bring us peace, to give us courage and comfort. But how can we begin to experience it? Here are a couple of practical things we can do to get in touch with God’s Spirit. We see both of these in our Old Testament reading, from the book of Lamentations. Jeremiah is the prophet who wrote Lamentations. Old Jeremiah had a tough job--he had to warn God’s people about the consequences of their sin, even though he knew it wouldn’t make a difference, and everyone would hate him, and the people would be sent into exile anyway. And during this difficult time, Jeremiah learned a lot about the presence of God through his crying, his weeping prayers before God.

In Lamentations 3, Jeremiah says, “*I called on your name, O Lord, from the depths of the pit... You came near when I called on you; you said, “Do not fear!”*” The first practical way that we can experience the presence of God in our lives is through prayer. Prayer is simply having a conversation with God. Many of us grew up hearing lots of fancy language for prayer; maybe we thought that we needed special words to pray, or special formulas for prayer. But there are no special words or formulas you need. The best prayers are straight from the heart, you talking to God. The shortest prayer you might pray could be this: “Help!” It doesn’t have to be any longer than that. If you wanted to, you could keep going; just talk to God like you were talking to a close friend, tell God your feelings, your fears, your worries, your hopes. You could write it down, if talking feels kind of strange. Just the process of communicating with God in a simple conversational way can help you feel God’s presence with you; becomes as close as your closest friend. And in this closeness God can bring you peace. Several years ago, I had a friend who had a lot of worry in her life--much of her family was sick or in trouble, and she was afraid for them--so afraid in fact that she could never sleep well. But when she couldn’t sleep, she would lay awake at night, and she would talk to God; she would take all of her worries and fears and pour them out to God. She would give them to God, trust them to God’s love and care, and it would bring her peace. Prayer, talking with God, is a way to experience God’s presence with us, and God’s peace.

The second practical way to experience God’s presence also comes from Jeremiah’s prayer in Lamentations. In chapter 3 he says, “*“The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”*” Here Jeremiah

is recalling God's activity in his life; the way that God has been with him before. What is Jeremiah doing? He's reflecting on his life; reflecting on our lives is a way that we can get in touch with God's presence near us and feel God's peace in our lives. This is as simple as thinking back over your life, and remembering the times when you have overcome fears before, overcome obstacles before, remembering when God has brought you peace before. God was with me then, God brought me through then, God is with me now, God can bring me through now. What is your story? How has God been with you? What have you come through? Over and over again in the Old Testament, we find the Israelites telling their story: they tell how God brought them out of slavery in Egypt, and brought into the promised land; they tell how God blessed them in a land flowing with milk and honey; they tell how they messed it up and were sent into exile, and how God was with them there; they tell how God didn't forget them in exile, but brought them back and blessed them again, and they tell how God promises to bless them still.

This our God. A God who promises to be with us on this journey, in whatever this adventure brings. A God who wants peace for our lives. The words that Jesus spoke to his disciples in the upper room are words that he is speaking to us now: Peace be with you. Peace be with us, to give us comfort and courage, to lead us out into the world to love others as God has loved us.

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September 20, 2009*