

Repentance—or failing to repent—is the primary obstacle to those not yet freely choosing to offer their will and life into the hands of our Savior Jesus the Christ. This is very understandable, isn't it? Why ever would anyone with a good head on her shoulders, anyone a little ambitious, maybe a good education, with anything “on the ball,” with a life of success and plenty awaiting her—why in the world would anyone ever hand all that over to Jesus and say, “I give up. I admit I cannot manage my own life as well as You can, nor achieve the heights You have called me to reach, so here... Please take this lost cause, this living dead, and use me, if You will, to any purpose You choose. No questions asked, I will actively obey You from this moment on, in every way I possibly can.” (To anyone who has not yet tried it, this approach to life and God admittedly appears to have its drawbacks...)

Although during Lent you have to admit it would be “fair game” for me to focus on repentance, you can relax—I'm not going to. Most of you here worshiping God already understand the principle, though of course the day-to-day practice always leaves room for improvement in every one of us.

But I am convinced one of the few genuine obstacles to the new life Jesus promises you and me, His followers—sharing in His life of power and purpose and peace (also in His life of letting go and suffering and obedience even to the cross) is fear. Most of us know what is supposed to happen when we offer our lives to God, what we had hoped would happen—and each one of us knows about that “slippage.” Slippage between the life Jesus lived, and into which He calls us, and the life with which we end up. Our being afraid, at one level or other, is responsible for a lot of that slippage.

What a high price each of us has paid to our fears, and part of the problem is that we mostly don't even notice it. What an exorbitant toll we have already paid to fear: in opportunities not taken advantage of, in relationships not entered into and loves not gained, in investments not made, in careers not pursued, in character not earned, in great (or modest) accomplishments not won: for our Lord, for our country, for our church, for our neighbor, for our selves.

(Fear, of course, can serve a useful purpose. A prudent fear keeps us eating bran and fresh vegetables, keeps us away from cigarettes and saturated fats, keeps us all from driving 100 m.p.h. down Pacific Coast Highway—fear can protect us from a lot of health problems, a lot of dumb mistakes, a lot of dead ends, a lot of misery and heartbreak. But I'm not talking about this kind of fear.)

I'm talking about the kind of fear that holds us back, that gets in our way—fear that limits us, harms us. The kind of fear that doesn't fight fair. [Have you noticed that fear, like the enemy, sneaks up on us. Fear often does not announce its presence. Fear works from within. Distorts our ability to perceive, so we are dealing with distorted data—like a prisoner banished to the dungeon so long the sunlight only hurts his eyes.]

Shakespeare noted that fear in the night triggers our imagination into creative hyperactivity; it “supposes every bush a bear.” Fear fills in the blank places; fear distorts our focus and all the data we perceive. It diminishes hope, it exaggerates the probability of failure. When you are afraid, lofting a 90-yard 9-iron with a little something at stake, the putting green looks the size of a beach towel.

There was a medieval legend about a peasant driving an old cart into town. He stopped the horses and the cart when an old woman asked him for a ride. But as he conversed with her he became quite alarmed. He asked who she was. She told the man she was “the plague.” With that he stopped the cart and ordered her out. But she then handed him her sword, and promised him she would take the lives of no more than ten persons in all the town. If she failed to keep her promise, he was to take her sword and slay her. With that assurance, and with her sword in his keeping, he drove on into town. Before long the death toll from the plague had risen to a hundred. The driver of the cart came upon the old woman in the streets. He drew her sword and was poised to run her thru when she raised her hand. “I have kept my word—I have taken only ten; fear has taken the rest.”

The brief lesson we heard about David touches upon fear.

(You may be aware that in schools the kinds sometimes take a “pre-test” to reveal what they already know before the class studies the unit. (And it doesn’t count against them if they don’t score well.) Here’s a pre-test, for fun, as to the life of David. At the time of this incident in his life, had David already single-handedly fought and defeated the fearsome Goliath? Had David already been anointed by the great prophet, the great man of God Samuel, to become king over Judah? Here’s a hint: have *you* already been delivered from one danger or another, from one fear or another? Have *you* already been baptized, and inherited a uniquely personal God-assignment for your days here on earth? Have *you* offered your life and everything you are and have into the care and service of our Lord Jesus—are you a committed member of His Church—and do *you* sometimes feel afraid, or hold back, or feel indifferent to God, or go “AWOL” from Christ’s Church?

When fear is sneaking up on you unannounced, distorting your focus, tempting you to see everything as more bleak than it is; when fear will not leave you alone—then what? Here are two observations to keep in mind.

--The obvious: fear and discouragement sneak up on even the strongest women and men of God. (Don’t feel bad if you struggle with being afraid: you’re in pretty good company.) Later in Lent we’ll look at the behavior of Peter, Jesus’s own choice to be the leader of His Church after His death and resurrection. Who had received more input, more mentoring, more teaching from the Master than Peter? Who had witnessed more of Christ’s healings, His courage under fire from the religious authorities out to squelch His influence and in the end to kill Him than Peter? Who was more self-confident about never betraying, never abandoning His Lord than Peter was? And yet when Jesus could especially have used his help, Peter failed Him.

--There can be a peculiar and subtle pattern to the onset of fear. (Some of our close calls with being afraid are incident-specific and appropriate, of course. When there is danger at hand you’re supposed to be afraid. Often when we’re tired, fear will strike; when you return home all alone in the dark knowing yet again that there’s no one beside you; when you wake up and remember all over again that you are still unemployed and unfortunately it’s not a nightmare. There are plenty of times when fear and discouragement will predictably knock at the door of your awareness.)

But David was overcome at an unlikely moment. He had just won a victory! Saul has already tried to take David's life more than once (using David for javelin target practice in the royal palace twice) and Saul and his 3000 troops are combing the caves in which David and his 600 fugitives are hiding—ready to put David to death. David hears that Saul and his army are near. He waits until nightfall, then sneaks right into the heart of Saul's encampment. He and his warrior Abishai are right there at Saul's sleeping bag, creeping over the snoring Abner, Saul's lead general and bodyguard. This is their chance! David could become king. Abishai asks David permission to run king Saul, asleep, thru with the sword.

David has far too much respect for God to allow such a thing: "God has anointed Saul to be His king; of course you may not kill him!" But they take Saul's own sword and canteen instead. Shortly after, from a safe distance away, they call out to Saul, letting him and all his men know they had him in their sights and could easily have killed him—and Saul confesses he has done wrong in doubting David. He publicly vindicates and blesses the life of David.

Saul has little reason to be particularly frightened at this moment, yet this is when "David said in his heart, 'I shall now perish one day by the hand of Saul.'" (Now Saul has already proved himself to be very unreliable, and his promise no good—but at this moment David is in no particular danger. Yet David is so fearful he flees for his life, convinced he is going to die at the hand of Saul. [David does not say to himself, "I'd better stage a tactical retreat for a while beyond the border..." He thinks "One of these days Saul is going to kill me; I'll never make it to become king."])

Sometimes the fear that gets us down is not incident-specific but cumulative. David had been faithful for a long stretch. He had resisted the temptation to fight back against Saul. He was no stranger to fear—he was a battle-tough warrior, a courageous leader, a young man at home in the outdoors, vigorous and faithful and fit—but his fears got the best of him at this peculiar moment of victory: ("My nerves are shot and I can't take this lethal game of cat-and-mouse any more. Sooner or later Saul and his army are going to catch me and kill me; at least I can postpone the inevitable if I abandon my plans and go over and hide in the land of our dreaded foe, the Philistines.") [27:1]) David finally gave in to the unceasing pressure: if just one time during the night that odd noise turned out to be one of Saul's men; if just one time one of his sentries fell asleep or failed him; if just one time Saul found him, if just one of his many men betrayed him David was a dead man. Sooner or later, it was inevitable... Almost all the time David managed to live under this constant pressure. But this time it got to him. So worn out from the struggle, finally he opened the door to the fear.

If you are striving to be faithful to God and you normally manage it—and if over time the burden gets too heavy and sometimes you falter—you are doing just as David did. Maybe this is the Lenten season you are feeling closer to God and more disciplined than ever...terrific, but keep alert. Maybe things are going your way and "life is good"...but keep alert. David was on top when he fell down, when he gave in to the fear.

The most faithful and courageous women and men of God are not immune from fear and doubt and discouragement and depression. Sometimes we falter due to the circumstances, as Peter and all the twelve apostles did at the cross, and sometimes we falter due to the cumulative stresses and challenges of life. (Consider yourself complimented if fear continues to knock at your door, or if even your moments of

triumph do not buy you immunity from your fears. The enemy has no incentive to much bother with persons already asleep, already neutralized, already too fearful and defeated to attract any attention in heaven or hell.)

But none of us people of God, followers of Jesus, wants to remain imprisoned by the darkness, the distortion, the paralysis, of fear. Fear only isolates us, only keeps us from the riches God has for us. Fear only slows us on our journey with Jesus; only robs us of our joy as His followers. Fear and discouragement will keep knocking on our door if we are the least bit alive, if we are any threat whatsoever to the evil one. But living in fear is not living in the Way of Jesus, the Way of Life, the Way of confidence and obedience, trusting in God—whether we feel afraid or not. Living in fear, whether we have recognized it or not, keeps us from experiencing life in the Kingdom of God.

Fear will not leave David alone. We noted how finally it “got” him, at least for a time, even when he was apparently doing just fine. Fear will not leave you alone, and sooner or later it’s probably going to “get” you. Maybe when you’re up, maybe when you’re down. When it does, (better, before it does) note the central factor in David’s going down. Note the critical factor in David giving in to this fear, discouragement, depression. (David giving in to fear is like a Ph.D. candidate failing kindergarten, failing cookies and milk; like the corporate CEO failing the entry level interview.) What causes David to give in to the fear? It is not his being tired or anxious; it’s not his victory over Saul. It’s certainly not his circumstances—he had known far more dangerous circumstances and not failed.

Hear what David was forgetting during that spell when he gave in to his fears. “I shall one day perish by the hand of Saul.” Fear has narrowed his focus, made him forgetful. David! There are only two parties in your quarrel? Two entities in the picture? Only you and Saul? No living God? David! What happened to the living God who delivered you from the threat of the lion, who delivered you from the danger of the bear? To the living God who would deliver you, the callow stripling of a shepherd boy up against a professional killer three times as strong as you and 100 times as bloodthirsty? What happened to the One whom you have already trusted over and over again to spare your life, to one day make you king? David: You leave out of your moral calculus, your reckoning your future, the most powerful Force in the universe and One whom you have known over and over again to be faithful? (Oh, I believe it; I still do too, sometimes, sad to say.)

Dear people of God: let’s not make this mistake, especially during Lent: keep on trusting in God who has already delivered you from the giants, from the lions, from God knows what perils in your own life.

(Some of you may be new to this church, or just checking us out, or maybe even really just curious about Jesus, checking Jesus out. I imagine Jesus is very pleased you are here. We are. Welcome.) We could all use the reminder, I suppose, from David and Peter on down, that God is faithful. If you’re not ready to trust in Jesus, or if it’s not working as you had hoped, then borrow some faith. Find a mentor—someone whose faith and life you admire. Join a small group, inviting the Holy Spirit to be especially alive within you at least once a week, when you gather. Read the Scriptures; become familiar with the giants of the faith—who also knew failure. One of the great treasures of this church are the many of you who have now been faithful for some time; many of you

who have built your lives on the solid Rock and have seen many storms and the winds and the rains come and go—and your lives continue to grow in trust and awareness and responsibility and in joy.

If any of you is running short on trust, borrow some: from others around you or, better yet, from the Holy Spirit. Keep praying. Ask God; keep asking, seeking, knocking. God is faithful.

I hope all of us clearly understand that our faith in Jesus is in relationship with Him thru His Spirit. Vital, life-changing faith in Jesus, the kind He desires, the only kind that's any good to anyone, is never only our response to a creed, a proposition. "I believe in God, the Father Almighty..." So do the demons, and they tremble. "I believe in God—" but I also believe in the Southwest Airlines departure schedule out of John Wayne Airport. In both cases the data is true, but neither does me any good. That sort of cognitive knowledge which says "I believe in God" but not quite enough to worship Him every Sunday or turn my life gladly over to His guidance is different from the living relationship which is built and deepened and renewed over time.

To say "I believe in God" will not be much help when the police car pulls up in front of your house late at night and I get a terrible feeling about a loved one, or when the oncologist takes a deep breath and begins to explain the lab results, or when the market tanks just when I was overextended and the timing is terrible...Fear knocking at the door has a way of revealing our shallow, "paper tiger" ritual belief in God which has no "legs," no substance, no confidence, no power to save in time of trouble. It is God who saves, not what we think we know.

The trust in Jesus which allows us to live beyond fear, to resist answering the door when fear comes knocking (when we're tired or already knocked off balance, or maybe when we're riding high)—the trust which will stand is built day to day, moment to moment, in communion with Him, in prayer, in thanksgiving, and preferably before the fear comes knocking. (As David's was built—day after day, year after year when even as a youth he spent time in the lonely pastures tending the sheep—with all the time in the world to pray to God, to sing psalms to God, to grow closer.)

Your life is never about simply you and your job, you and your relationships, you and your future, you and your health, any more than David's future was simply that one day finally Saul would find him and dispatch him. Never forget the power and promise of the living God in your life, in your present and your future.

The living God has created you and called you by name and redeemed you. Has God not designed and created you with unique gifts and opportunities, and trusted in you to become His ambassador among your friends, to make a difference for His sake in the world?

Has God not already delivered you from great dangers? Has He not already begun to exchange your self-preoccupation for the joy of His service, your indifference for His zeal, your curiosity with His assurance, your fear with His love which casts out fear?

Of course. Of course.

1Samuel 26:21-27:2

21 Then Saul said, "I have done wrong; come back, my son David, for I will never harm you again, because my life was precious in your sight today; I have been a fool, and have made a great mistake."

22 David replied, "Here is the spear, O king! Let one of the young men come over and get it.

23 The LORD rewards everyone for his righteousness and his faithfulness; for the LORD gave you into my hand today, but I would not raise my hand against the Lord's anointed.

24 As your life was precious today in my sight, so may my life be precious in the sight of the LORD, and may he rescue me from all tribulation."

25 Then Saul said to David, "Blessed be you, my son David! You will do many things and will succeed in them." So David went his way, and Saul returned to his place.

27:1 David said in his heart, "I shall now perish one day by the hand of Saul; there is nothing better for me than to escape to the land of the Philistines; then Saul will despair of seeking me any longer within the borders of Israel, and I shall escape out of his hand."