

The Gift of Fear

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Acts 4 – 5

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Ben Patterson, who was pastor at Irvine Presbyterian church for over 20 years and now is a chaplain at Westmont college in Santa Barbara, tells this story in the journal Leadership.

In 1988, three friends and I climbed Mount Lyell, the highest peak in Yosemite National Park. Two of us were experienced mountaineers. I was not one of the experienced two. Our base camp was less than 2,000 feet from the peak, but the climb to the top and back was to take the better part of a day, due in large part to the difficulty of the glacier one must cross to get to the top. The morning of the climb we started out chattering and cracking jokes.

As the hours passed, the two mountaineers opened up a wide gap between me and my less-experienced companion. Being competitive by nature, I began to look for shortcuts to beat them to the top. I thought I saw one to the right of an outcropping of rock - so I went, deaf to the protests of my companion.

Perhaps it was the effect of the high altitude, but the significance of the two experienced climbers not choosing this path did not register in my consciousness. It should have, for 30 minutes later I was trapped in a cul-de-sac of rock atop the Lyell Glacier, looking down several hundred feet of a sheer slope of ice, pitched at about a 45 degree angle. ... I was only about 10 feet from the safety of a rock, but one little slip and I wouldn't stop sliding until I landed in the valley floor some 50 miles away! It was nearly noon, and the warm sun had the glacier glistening with slippery ice. I was stuck and I was scared.

It took an hour for my experienced climbing friends to find me. Standing on the rock I wanted to reach, one of them leaned out and used an ice ax to chip two little footsteps in the glacier. Then he gave me the following instructions: Ben, you must step out from where you are and put your foot where the first foothold is. When your foot touches it, without a moment's hesitation swing your other foot across and land it on the next step. When you do that, reach out and I will take your hand and pull you to safety.

That sounded real good to me. It was the next thing he said that made me more frightened than ever. But listen carefully: As you step across, do not lean into the mountain! If anything, lean out a bit. Otherwise, your feet may fly out from under you, and you will start sliding

down.

I don't like precipices. When I am on the edge of a cliff, my instincts are to lie down and hug the mountain, to become one with it, not to lean away from it! But that was what my good friend was telling me to do. I looked at him real hard. ... Was there any reason, any reason at all, that I should not trust him? I certainly hoped not! So for a moment, based solely on what I believed to be the good will and good sense of my friend, I decided to say no to what I felt, to stifle my impulse to cling to the security of the mountain, to lean out, step out, and traverse the ice to safety. It took less than two seconds to find out if my faith was well founded. It was.

-Ben Patterson, Waiting, Leadership, Vol. 15, Number 1.

I begin with this story because, well, the Bible story wasn't exactly victorious and because this particular story illustrates well two concepts of what to do when we are afraid. The first is to lean into fear believing that's where God can take hold of you. The second is to trust in the friends God brings you.

But first let's begin with the idea that fear is a gift. That's right, a gift. I'm not talking about anxiety which I see on the children's faces at Rachel's school as they run to their classrooms well after the morning bell has rung. Fear is more like the feeling you get when you have broken your mother's favorite piece of glass art and you hear her footsteps coming near. Fear says something has gone very wrong. But fear also points to the way forward. See, when Mom comes down the hallway, you could think quickly of a lie. You could try to avoid what you most fear...her anger with you. You can try. But notice how fear points to that which, if you want to move forward in love, you must face. "Mom, I'm so sorry."

Fear is a gift. When Ben was afraid, he stayed put, until help came. He didn't try to do something on his own because he was scared stiff. In fact, if he had more fear of the mountain beforehand, he may never have been in that predicament. But he created a little lie for himself. "I'm as good as they are." He wanted to beat the experts to the top of the mountain. Now that his life was on the line, fear made him stop and wait. On his own, he had no way forward.

Fear is a gift. Fear makes us stop and listen. Fear points us toward that which will give us life. Fear points us in

the direction where we will find God.

Ananias and Sapphira, in our scripture, like Ben, choose to follow a different path from the expert, Barnabas. They do not hand over all the money they receive from the sale of their land. And they were unafraid to tell a little lie. From a careful reading of Peter's monologue it becomes more and more clear that their sin had less to do with their not wanting to hand over the money, and everything to do with their lying about the amount of money they got for their land.

Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal?

When Peter turns to Sapphira he questions her about the sales price. He gives her a chance to tell the truth. But she persists in the lie.

Why lie? What do you think was their reason? What is your reason for your lies?

I think it may be fear of fear.

Certainly Sapphira and Ananias were afraid. They were afraid to be left in a place where they would live in fear if they would have enough. Ananias and Sapphira do not trust the community to give them everything. But more problematic, I believe, is that they do not trust the community with the truth of their fear. So they create a little lie: "They'll never know how much we sold it for. We can go through the motions and pretend."

Oh maybe I'm just making excuses for the Bible again. But if the scripture is simply telling us to give everything to the church, there's nothing more to say. And, would you do it? Maybe a few of you would. If that's you, please contact Bob Underwood and Doug Hall immediately for they are leading the charge for planned giving.

But I suspect it happened again and again, that would be disciples came to Peter and said, "Look I am ready to believe. I am ready to come with you on the way with Jesus. I accept that it was I who helped kill him. I believe God raised him. I want to be forgiven. I want to live with God in a new way. But, look, I'm scared. I don't know what will happen. I'm not ready to give everything." And Peter would baptize them even so.

The giving up of everything was never a criterion to being baptized. Instead, it is described here in Acts as a result of living within the baptized community. The Holy Spirit, when freed (shouts out the book of Acts) created a social paradise where all was shared and no one had need.

In a beautiful moment of insight, Holly in Bible Study connected this scene with Ananias and Sapphira in Acts

to the "fall story" of Genesis. This is the story of what kills Christian Community; the story of sin entering into paradise. Notice the reference to Satan--that snake. Notice the paradise that leads into this scripture: "Great grace was upon them....there was no needy one among them." It parallels Acts 2:43 ff, the description of what happens after the Holy Spirit came down in tongues, as of fire, upon them: "Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common...." --Acts 2 Christian community.

That Greek word translated "awe," by the way, is phobos. It is the same root word that is translated fear in our scripture.

The sin that destroys the Eden of Acts 2 Christian Community, the sin that destroys the work of the Holy Spirit, is hubris. "You did not lie to us but to God!" Hubris, the belief I know better than God. Hubris, the belief I can make it up the mountain faster if I choose my own way. Hubris throws away the gift of fear.

Awe/Fear is a gift of the Holy Spirit. When the Holy Spirit enters in, "fear/awe came upon everyone." While the dead Ananias and Sapphira make it sound reasonable that fear seizes folks, as if they are imprisoned by it, the Greek has no such colorful word, saying simply that fear came upon them. Furthermore, the next portion of scripture sure doesn't sound like people living in fear but rather people living with the Holy Spirit. "Now many signs and wonders were done among the people through the apostles."

How are we to deal with our fear of fear? How do we face it, move through it, find God in it? I had our readers begin with the last line of chapter 4, the line that describes the result of the community's prayer when Peter and John return to tell them that they've been threatened by the Sanhedrin and told to stop "speaking in Jesus name."

"The place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness."

Isn't it interesting where prayer leads them? In the face of the Sanhedrin's threat, God doesn't tell them to cling to safety, to stop speaking when it isn't advisable. Oh, sure, God knows they are afraid. But God also knows for them to avoid doing what makes them afraid is to put them on a slope as slippery and as deadly as the one Ben faced that day. It is the way of lies, the way to break apart forever the Christian church.

Apostles aren't meant to live safe lives. The church doesn't exist to keep us safe. For our acts to ensure our own safety often rob God of the chance to take hold of

us.

If Ben had leaned towards the mountain, if he had acted on his impulse to be safe, his feet may have slipped out from under him, his friend may never have reached him.

In prayer, the apostles are given courage to lean into their worst fear. The Sanhedrin will get angrier and angrier. They will seek them out as they did Jesus. Many will die. Yet, they will continue to speak out boldly and, through the Holy Spirit, will continue to do signs and wonders. They won't be safe, but because they lean out and allow the Holy Spirit to take hold of them, they will live with joy.

The idea for this sermon began with the end of Harry Potter who the reader walks with as he goes to die. That which he sought to avoid throughout the series of books, that which he and many of us fear most—death—he now goes toward. But he doesn't walk alone.

Neither should we. Harry by a form of magic calls forth those who have loved him throughout his life. They walk with him each step of the way. Those things that call forth paralyzing, gripping fear, no longer have hold over him. He goes to do what he has been called on to do.

Ben would never have been able to get out of his peril without his friend. It was his friend who created the steps out. It was his friend who told him it was necessary to lean away from the mountain. It was his friend who gave him courage to make it to the rock.

Peter and John, after they had been threatened by the Sanhedrin, ran towards the nascent Christian Community. They didn't try to go at it alone.

Stop trying to act courageously on your own, as if it is a defining feature of courage. I know you've been told you must be strong and independent to be courageous. When I was looking for an image of "courage" for the Women's retreat, there was picture after picture of a woman alone climbing up a sheer cliff. What's that about?

Cyndy taught us a lot about courage, did she not? In those last days, what did she surround herself with? Her friends...the friends God brought her, many through this church.

So why are you spending so much time going at it all alone or making your own way as if there isn't a community of faithful friends waiting here for you? This church is filled with experienced seekers on the Way, with people who are animated by the Holy Spirit, willing to give their all that you might be able to reach the rock, our salvation, our God. You'll meet such people on the patio, at retreats, in Bible Studies, in the pew next to you.

Take a chance, invite someone to lunch, clear the weekend

in April for the Men's Retreat, decide you will attend a Bible Study and call us to find out which would be the best fit.

It is time for you to lean out a little so God has a chance to take hold of you. It is time to take a few uncertain steps forward and allow a new faith friend to give you the courage you need to do what you must do. You're not called to die today or to give everything up. It's nothing so dramatic. But let's not tell a lie. It is no small thing to be on the path of the apostles, to trust God enough to follow them on the Way. It is no small thing, but it is the way of signs and wonders.

Come on, lean out...just a little.