

**“Come, O Children, Listen to Me;
I Will Teach You the Fear of the Lord” (Psalm 34:11)**

A Lenten sermon about fear

What are you afraid of, really afraid of? The story’s told about a children’s sermon. The minister asked, “What has four legs, a tail, and barks?” One of the children said, **“It sounds like a dog, but I better say ‘Jesus.’”** Sometimes when we get into church we’re tempted to think pious thoughts and say pious things that don’t match reality. So, I’ll ask again. What are you afraid of, really afraid of?

Dr. C.F.W. Walther was the first president of our Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. You might imagine that this 18th century Germany speaking preacher couldn’t identify too well with normal people living normal lives. But listen to what Dr. Walther said.

Many preachers picture the Christian as a person who does not fear death. That is a serious misrepresentation, because the great majority of Christians are afraid to die. If a Christian does not fear death and declares that he is ready to die at any time, God has bestowed a special grace upon him. Some have expressed this sentiment before their physician told them that they would not live another night, but after that they were seized with a terrible fear. (Law and Gospel, 313)

So **what are you afraid of?** Death or illness? Separation or divorce? Your children? Your parents? Fitting in at school? April 15th? Your shaky financial status? The fact is we’re all afraid from time to time of something. “Holy Passion: Mine and Thine” is our Lenten theme. One of the most common emotions, a passion if you will, is fear.

Although the Gospel story about Peter denying Jesus doesn’t use the word “fear,” it obviously was present. Why did Peter deny Jesus? It’s hard to imagine why he denied Jesus if he wasn’t afraid what might happen to him. When the soldiers mocked Jesus, they were trying intimidating him. The word “intimidate” comes from a Latin word connected to fear. And were Pilate and Herod playing on fear when they had Jesus on the carpet? Of course they were. Jesus didn’t cave in to fear, as Peter did, but it certainly was a major part of His Holy Passion.

Psalm 34:11 says, “Come, my children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord.” **In the Bible** the word fear is used in several ways. **There is a spectrum, a range of the way the word “fear” is used.** At one end of this spectrum, this range of fear is the feeling that you and I have when something bigger than us, something more powerful than us, something too big for us to handle comes at us and comes at us to us to do us in. At the other end of the

spectrum, the word “fear” describes much the same feeling. At this other end something comes at you that is bigger than you are, more powerful than you are, more than you can handle. But, listen up, this power comes to help you, not to hurt you. It is for you, not against you. When this comes into your life, this awesome, overwhelming power that comes to help you, you react with “Wow! Amazing! Awesome!” That reaction is what the Bible calls the “fear of the Lord.”

It’s pretty common for us preachers to say, “Don’t be afraid.” I’ve done that myself. Unfortunately, just telling someone not to be afraid really doesn’t work too well. You know why? “You shouldn’t be afraid,” is a command. That makes it Law. Remember, Law and Gospel? The Law tells us what to do or not to do, how we should be or not be, but the kicker is that the Law doesn’t enable us to fulfill its commands. **There are countless sermons that say “Don’t be afraid,” but the poor people go out unable to live up to the Law.**

When Jesus tells us, “Don’t be afraid,” he often adds these words, “It is I.” That’s Gospel. “Don’t be afraid. It is I.” I’m the One who wasn’t intimidated by the soldiers. I’m the One who was steadfast before Annas and Caiaphas and Pilate and Herod. I’m the One who saw in advance how hard it would be but was willing to drink the cup. While my dear Peter denied Me, while you have denied Me, I have never denied you. “Don’t be afraid. It is I.” “Whosoever cometh unto Me, I will in no wise cast out” (John 6:37). **Yes, you shouldn’t be afraid, Law, but the Gospel is the only way to make it happen.**

So the way to deal with fear is to acknowledge whatever you’re afraid of and then move to Jesus. The malefactor on the cross did that. He didn’t mock Jesus because He knew he was paying for his sins and about to enter eternity. That’s the one end of the spectrum. But then he went to Jesus. “Remember me when you come into Your kingdom.” Jesus comforted him, “Today you will be with Me in paradise.” That Gospel took the malefactor from the fear of a dying sinner to the awesome comfort of a dying saint. That malefactor knew the amazing, wonderful “fear of God.”

Dr. August Mennicke was for many years the president of the Minnesota North District of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and then First Vice President of Synod. In a book called Devotions for the Chronologically Gifted, Dr. Mennicke told a wonderful story about his grandson: *Our daughter shared a conversation she overheard at home. Our 3-year-old grandson was standing at the basement stairs, trying to muster enough courage to make the descent. Before taking the first step, he said, “Oh Jesus, it’s awful dark down there. You’d better hold my hand.”* (p. 58)

The poet **John Greenleaf Whittier** put it this way:

A tender child of summers three

*Seeking her little bed at night,
Paused on the dark stair timidly.
“O Mother, take my hand,” said she,
“And then the dark will all be light.”*

*We older children grope our way
From dark behind to dark before;
And only when our hands we lay
Dear Lord, in Thine, the night is day.*

*Reach downward to the sunless days
Wherein our guides are blind as we,
And faith is small, and hope delays;
Take Thou the hands of prayer we raise,
And let us feel the light of Thee.*

So what has 4 legs, a tail, and barks? Roars? That fear that is lurking in your mind. Face it. Don't be afraid? No. **Don't be afraid; it is I.** Amen.