

“Do Not Fear! DO Trust!”
C Pentecost 4, Cowboy Church; Mark 4:35-41
June 20, 2021; 10:00 am
Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO
Rev. Rebecca K. Poos

³⁵ On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.” ³⁶ And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. ³⁷ A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped.

³⁸ But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” ³⁹ He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. ⁴⁰ He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” ⁴¹ And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

EVER BEEN AFRAID?

Have you ever been afraid? Ever felt anxiety or downright fear about something? Something that might not have even happened yet, but COULD happen, just the same?

Do you know how many times “Do Not Fear” is commanded—yes *commanded!*—in the bible? Hint—it’s in there MORE than talk about love is! It’s on the lips of many. Of Jesus. Of Angels. Of Prophets and Psalmists. It seems to be God’s favorite commandment, if we can presume to speak for God in that way.

The phrases, “**Fear not**” or “**Be not afraid**,” occur 103 times in the King James Version of the **Bible**.

Books have been written, calendars mass-produced, claiming that “Do Not Fear” or some form of “Be Not Afraid” is literally in the Bible as we know it 365 times! So, there you have it—one time for each day of the year!

And, it may well be. And it may be more. How do you parse or count all the other nuances like, “there is no fear in love, for perfect love casts out all fears...” like First John proclaims.

The bottom line? It doesn’t matter! It’s probably both/and, more than, or a new phrase I learned this week from Bruce Epperly: A Bunch And!”

It IS the most prevalent wisdom that is shared in the scriptures—whether you take it as a commandment or just friendly advice, or even a matter of life and death. For, it may well be that. How many of us suffer in really harmful-to-our spirit says, when we are fearful, wrapped in anxiety, or even despair far too often?

How much does fear consume and threaten to contain us? And not the healthy kind of Fear, like awe—for you know, don’t you—that ‘the Fear of God’ in the Bible, is *not* the trembling, make you nauseous and keep you up at night kind of anxiety, but instead, quaking awe?!

It’s a *thrilling* feeling of wonder, amazement, appreciation and gratitude that we feel and express to our Maker. Exuberant joy! Make-you-want to dance kind of wonder and excitement. Stuff that makes your heart sing and your heels kick up and prance across a pasture!

So, fears can be good or bad, full of awe and wonder, or full of anxious trepidation.

“Our fears can be a spiritual short circuit; preventing us from being fully present, even to those we love.” (Kathleen Norris)

But naming and facing our fears can open us up to acts of great compassion. And so much more! It can open us up to life itself.

Gareth Higgins, author of “How Not to Be Afraid” suggests we reimagine our fears by choosing a new, creative and trusting story for our lives. Not like creating a “fake persona” or an

“avatar” or anything like that, but choosing to look at our life story and tell that story and how we participate in it, through creative and generative lenses. Lenses of hope and resilience that come from a place—not of denial—but courage and facing fears head on.

He sounds a little like Jesus in his encouraging disciples everywhere to look at life and all its events through new lenses; with a broader perspective. Higgins is no “self-help guru” or Pollyanna snake oil salesman, pedaling hope and joy. He has cred! He grew up in Northern Ireland, in the midst of The Troubles as they called that horrendous era of political and civil unrest and downright tribal war.

Higgins also grew up gay in a very conservative religious tradition in the midst of that secular trauma. He grew up in fear. Constant fear. And he realized that he would not survive if he let the fear win. If that was his “prevailing story.” So, he delved-in, with others at his side to counter fear and hateful acts with love and loving resistance.

“It’s helpful to imagine each moment brings both gifts and challenges.” (Higgins)

His approach, and one I think we all need to endeavor to do, is to *face* those gifts and challenges, both, head on and with great honesty! Accepting and embracing it ALL—as you, me, all of us, work to change our lives and the world.

And, to work on our fears does NOT mean that we ever deny the suffering of others, or turn a blind eye to that suffering. No matter how far away, in a seeming different galaxy from us, outside of our safe and homogenous Bubble.

Higgins agrees (with me ☺ that it’s “Both/And” as so many things are. He says, “You don’t have to be in denial about real suffering to see the amazing possibilities and goodness of a moment in which interdependence among humans and with the

ecosystem is more loudly, widely, and creatively expressed than ever.”

That interdependency “will be more honored, inequities and other injustices will be faced and overcome by the vision of beloved community, and retribution will give way to creativity. How much *we* experience of the healing will depend on the story we tell—perhaps, especially, on the story we tell about fear.”

HORSE STORIES—of FEAR OR NOT!

My riding buddy has a horse named Sriracha. She’s barely 5 years old, and is the sweetest, most curious creature. It’s fun to follow her on the trail and watch as her attention is grabbed by something new. Sometimes startling—such as a jack-rabbit that was *hugeantic* and appeared out of nowhere and was going to eat her if she didn’t bolt! Other times not startling at all, just new and different from what she’s experienced before and she needs to pause, scope it out and get her head around this new thing.

I love her curious and spirited nature—it’s inspiring. She’s got a spirit of “Try.” As I call it. Now, Yoda—you remember Yoda from Star Wars, right?—would say, “There is no TRY.” But that’s a little different. Yoda was trying to convince Luke Skywalker not to hesitate when confronted with challenges, but to jump in with both feet. And not doing ANYTHING half-heartedly.

You know what’s even better about that Curious Spirit? That “Spirit of Try?” with that cute little horse? My 23-year-old horse named Satin has it too! She’s an old gray mare—perhaps not what she used to be! (she’s slowing down with a touch of arthritis and stumbles from time to time—but her *spirit* is NOT slowing down! And, it’s no less inquisitive and curious and willing to give it a try than it ever was!

We who are approaching middle age and beyond have something to learn from this horse! I’ll never forget the first

time—way back when we got her at age 9 (an untrained, pasture ornament—that we tried to use a spray bottle with her—probably detangler for her mane and tail.

Oh, did she startle! She did not like that wet mist hitting her coat, or the hissing sound it made. But, then, we let her check it out—smell the bottle, get acquainted—and once befriended, she was fine with it.

We learned a valuable lesson that day. She needed to “meet new things”—whether objects or situations or people or critters. She trained us well—ever after, we let her touch noses with whatever was going to be in her space, and then she allowed it.

More than once, when meeting a new horse, she even touched more than noses, as they put their full faces together in greeting! (It still warms our memories to this day to remember those moments!)

In new situations, Satin never acts *afraid*, really. Mostly just curious and alert. We call her, “Sentinel Horse!” Is this friend or foe, she wonders aloud? Is this something I’ve done before—like hopping over a ditch or wading through a raging creek? Have I ever stepped over big logs before? Climbed stairs? Crossed a noisy wooden bridge?

“Well, I don’t *think* I have, but I’m sure willing to give it a try. Just because I haven’t done it before doesn’t mean I don’t want to. Especially if my buddy horse is showing me the way and I am eager to keep up!” She’s like a little kid running to keep up with the big kids—never wanting to be left behind!

Valarie Kaur, in *See No Stranger*, says, when encountering someone new, we might look differently than we have before, saying to ourselves: “*You are not a stranger. You are someone I have not gotten to know yet.*”

Horses teach us that same idea: Unknown situations and things we haven’t encountered before don’t need to be **feared**. They

may be friends or fun things we just haven’t gotten to meet yet! New experiences that may well enrich our lives if we are open to them.

And none of this means, there aren’t truly frightening moments. Situations that are challenging can instill fear in the bravest of us. Just last fall we encountered a steep, snowy hillside on a ride that we didn’t remember being there, and didn’t have a choice but to go that way.

We debated whether to stay on the horses or try to walk them up the slick hill. Neither option worked particularly well! Sometimes it’s much safer to stay on their back than to try to lead them alongside you, if you don’t have good traction in your boots! (That’s a life lesson all in itself! Another sermon for another day ☺)

(Cowboy boots are perfect for slipping out of a stirrup quickly in a pinch or a crash. They are NOT good for hiking slippery hillsides of dirt, rocks or snow! It’s all about the gear, in every endeavor, isn’t it?!)

Again, Satin showed her amazing colors—courage and tenacity—as she forgot her arthritis for a moment and plunged up that hill like a filly a third her age, sliding a bit, but not to be deterred, following her friend Punkin—who is also the same age and doesn’t have the benefit of being an Arab!

Partway up, I decided to slide off and relieve her of my weight and just let her have her head and go. I knew she’d scale the hill more easily without me on her back, and wouldn’t run off. I hoped!

But then, her spirit of curiosity took a backseat to the spirit of connection we have always had and she stopped halfway up the hill on a level spot, to the side, to wait for me! I struggled up in my slippery boots and found her shaking a bit in trembling excitement AND fear, and looking to me, her person, for guidance.

Together we stopped and took a breath, reassured each other, I got back in the saddle on that level spot, and hunkered down on her back, letting gravity help as we streamlined our bodies, effort and energy. And, together we made it carefully and safely up that hill. Was she trembling at the top? Shook up? No way! She was elated! Exuberant! Satin was not even breathing hard.

(Unlike Punkin, who was seeking to file a formal complaint with *her* person about the arduous journey!) And, breathing heavy for several minutes. But, to her defense, being a Quarter Horse and not an Arab, she doesn't have DNA from the desert coursing through her veins!)

Satin saw no reason to stop any longer at the top to “catch our breath” and this old gray mare with arthritis plunged full speed ahead, ready for the rest of the ride. Her courage was bolstered by the challenge. My concern about her aging process found great relief!

Her spirit was as strong and resilient as ever! Her trust in me to guide her where we needed to go, and stick together was renewed and reaffirmed. And she still, to this day, approaches every new scene with a “can do spirit of curiosity and willingness to try.”

“Jesus! Don't you care that we were about to drown?”
the disciples cried out when they felt afraid.

HOW DO WE TRUST AND OBEY, exactly?

Higgins' response, like that of Jesus, would be: *“Overcoming fear is mostly an inside job, not entirely dependent on personal or political circumstances. What you need most is an open heart, someone to talk to, and a willingness to write your true self onto the fabric of the world around you, concerning yourself less with other people's judgments and more with the common good.”*

*Fear can be debilitating. The path toward overcoming it can be thrilling. It unfolds, one mind-expanding, heart-opening, body-invigorating, community-inducing, love-soaked step at a time. (Gareth Higgins, *How Not to be Afraid.*)*

What's the story we tell? What attitude do we choose to convey? What stance do we take, as we are in that boat, on that stormy sea? Or, perhaps, in a saddle on a snowy hillside, hunkered down with our partner against the elements, facing our fears together?

With trembling and trepidation, but also courage and a Can-Do Spirit of curiosity and camaraderie?

What did Jesus do? What did he tell his disciples—then and now—about fear and raging storms? Trust and Obey, as the old gospel song goes, for there's no other way! Amen.