

We just heard one fishing story. Here is another one.

A man had spent the day fishing without so much as a single bite on the end of his line. Since he did not want to go home empty-handed, he decided to stop at the local fish market. He told the clerk, "I would like three good-sized fish, but before you wrap them, please toss them to me, one by one." The clerk looked puzzled at this request. "Sir," he said, "that is a strange thing to ask. Why do you want me to toss you each of the fish?" "Oh," the man replied, "that way I will be able to tell my wife truthfully that I caught them!"

Okay, I admit, the fishing story that we read in Luke's gospel is better. Jesus was standing by the lake watching some fishermen clean their nets. He got into the fishing boat belonging to Simon, they pushed out from shore a short distance, then Jesus sat down in the boat and taught the crowds who had gathered on the shore nearby. When he had finished speaking, Jesus said to Simon, "Point the boat out into the deep water and let down your nets. We are going fishing." Simon was doubtful. He said, "We were out fishing all night and caught nothing. But, since you say so, we will head out again and let down the nets." We know what happened. We are told they caught so many fish that the nets began to break from the weight. The fishermen in Simon's boat called for their partners in a nearby boat to help. By the time they had finished loading all the fish, both boats were at risk of sinking.

It is a story of God's astonishing abundance. Simon, experienced and hardened fisherman that he was, could not comprehend what had just occurred, and who can blame him? Overcome by amazement, he fell down at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." Jesus said to Simon – and here's the crucial part – he said, "Do not be afraid. From now on you will be catching people." When the boats returned to shore, Simon and some of the other fishermen left everything and followed Jesus.

Jesus had said to Simon, when Simon witnessed something that he could not understand or explain or control, "do not be afraid." I count at least twelve places in the gospel stories of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, where Jesus says to his closest friends and followers, either "do not be afraid," or "do not fear." It is one of Jesus' most frequently repeated pieces of encouragement when he encountered people attempting to cope with whatever troubles had entered their lives: "Do not be afraid," Jesus says. "Do not fear."

What do you fear? What are you afraid of?

All of us are afraid of something, and perhaps many things.

Do you fear becoming ill? Or fear losing your independence?

Do you fear for your livelihood; fear not having enough money to meet your needs?

Do you fear the future? Do you fear memories of your past that continue to trouble you?

Do you fear for your family, or for your broken relationships with others?

Do you fear loneliness, or rejection, or unhappiness, or uncertainty?

Do you fear dying?

Do you ever fear God?

As humans we are born with the innate ability to fear. It is a necessary defence mechanism.

Jesus said, "Do not be afraid," but that can be much easier said than done. What do you fear?

It has been said that all religions are ultimately concerned with overcoming fear. An *unrealistic* religion says, "Fear not, just trust in God and God will see that none of the things you fear will happen to you." From my experience, such a belief is nonsense. To imagine that if we do the right things, say the right things, think the right things, pray the right things, then God will prevent fearsome and unpleasant events from happening in our lives is just not realistic.

By contrast, *real* religion, *mature* religion, says, “Fear not, the things you fear might happen to you, but they are really nothing to be afraid of.” Because although darkness in this life is very real and takes many different forms, God is always present with us in the darkness of our fears. When we believe that God always is a loving, caring, guiding presence in our lives, there is no limit to the fear-destroying comfort accompanying that belief.

Which brings me back to your fears. Among your fears, do you ever fear God? Some people fear God a little; some people fear God a lot. Whether or not we fear God stems largely from how we were raised and what we have been taught about God at different times in our life.

I think even for those of us – and I include you as well as myself – who sincerely believe that God is a God of love, and forgiveness, and abundance, even among us there can remain a niggling little residue of fear that perhaps God knows us, and our deepest innermost thoughts and feelings, just a little too well for our own good. And that fear – or if you think fear is too strong a term than call it caution, or reluctance, or hesitancy, or wariness – can prevent us from getting as close to God as we could or should. Our hearts tell us that we can revere God, but sometimes our heads trick us into fearing God, and we should never fear God.

One person compared this tendency to fear God, to playing hide-and-seek with a squirrel. They wrote: “Yesterday while walking in the park I saw a squirrel. As soon as the squirrel spotted me, it ran up a tree, stopping about five feet off the ground. Curious, I walked closer to that tree. As I did, the squirrel scooted around to the opposite side of the tree. I started to walk slowly around the tree. As I did, the squirrel went around the tree too, always keeping the tree between itself and me. It felt like I was playing hide-and-seek with the squirrel. I was determined to see that squirrel. The squirrel appeared equally determined not to be seen by me. Finally, I started going in the opposite direction around the tree. Sure enough, I spotted the squirrel coming around the other way towards me. When it spotted me, the squirrel flicked its tail and immediately reversed direction again. Round and round we went again for several more minutes.”

The person concluded the story by admitting, “That is how I am with God at times. I’m like that little squirrel, living a life of caution and scurrying. Then, out of nowhere, God enters my world, and I am afraid but curious enough not to run completely away from God. Instead, I scurry up a nearby tree and cling to its solid trunk. When God comes closer, I begin to go around and around the tree, always careful to keep the tree – or some other barrier – between God and me. It is not that I am terrified of God. No, I am fascinated by God, but also mistrustful enough not to let God get too close.”

Does that person’s story about their behaviour towards God seem in any way familiar to you? Is it at all reflective of how you sometimes interact with God? Not running away from God but keeping God at a safe distance. It sure describes me.

The good news in all of this – and the word “gospel” does mean “good news” – is that as Simon the fisherman discovered while out fishing with Jesus, God accepts us even when we don’t fully accept God. Recall that Simon said to Jesus, “go away from me.”

Simon had been reluctant to head out into the deep waters as Jesus had instructed, and to “let down their nets” because he was convinced that the fish were not biting. We can hardly blame him for his skepticism.

It makes me wonder how often we avoid putting out into the deep waters of trusting rather than fearing God. What would it mean, in a very practical and everyday way, for you and me to “put out into the deep and let down the nets?”

We see in today’s gospel lesson how God calls ordinary people, despite their – and our – limitations and flaws and fears, to trust in God. After all, there was nothing extraordinary about Simon Peter and his fishing partners. They were simple fishermen, simply doing what they did every day,

minding their own business and cleaning their nets after a long and particularly discouraging night of work, when Jesus came along, entered their utterly normal lives, and changed everything. Simon was acutely aware of his unworthiness, but Jesus was not put off in the slightest.

Throughout Scripture we see that human sin, and failure, and inadequacy are no obstacles to God's call. God calls imperfect people to be God's much-loved followers. Jesus called Simon and the others to leave their nets and follow him. He called them not because of who they were, but because of who they could become.

Christ also calls us, every day that we have life, not because of who we are, but because of who we could become. **Amen.**

**Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany**

**6 February 2022**

**Rev. Dr. Keith Fleming**