

“From fear to compassion”

Genesis 15:1-6; Luke 13:31-35 (March 13, 2022)

by Paul Matheson

I have an early memory of being a little child (maybe 3 or 4 years old) and going to visit my grandparents. They were dairy farmers, but they also had some chickens. For a child my age, the scary animals were not the cows, big as they might be. They were the chickens.

I can remember my grandfather taking me to the henhouse to feed them. When he opened the door, there was a great cacophony. A huge disturbance with hens in motion, clucking and flapping about, making a terrible fuss. It scared me!

My grandfather took me by the hand and drew me to one side, telling me to stay there, while he emptied his pail of feed. I didn't like it, not one bit. I was glad when he led me out of that place and closed the door. Chickens can be scary for small children.



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Of course lots of things in the world are scary. And children don't always realize what they need to be afraid of. Some things – monsters under the bed – don't actually pose a danger. While other things – a hot burner on the stove – do.

Our fears are always with us. They change over time. But they never really go away. What causes *your* heart to beat faster, your breathing to become rapid, your muscles to be tense, your mouth to be dry, your sleep to be disturbed?

So much has changed these last few years: stresses at work and in relationships, divisions in our society, changes in technology, terrible happenings on the world stage. I wonder if there is a cumulative effect, one thing piling on top of one another? So much to be afraid of!



Our reading today from the book of Genesis reveals some of the anxiety that Abram felt. Back in Genesis 12, God made a covenant with him, promising *descendants*, and a *land*.

But then Abram began to worry. There's still no children. All those descendants – where are they? He said, “O Lord God, what will you give me, for *I continue* childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?”

I can imagine him stewing about this. Wondering if the promise was real. Wondering if God could be trusted. Wondering about taking matters into his own hands. Abram must have realized he wasn't getting any younger. Nor was Sarah. “Lord, are you really going to give me a child? 'Cause I'm afraid we may be past the time where that is even possible.”

In the verses that follow, we discover it wasn't just a *child* on Abram's mind. It was the long-promised *land* as well. "O Lord God, how am I to *know* that I shall possess it?" Anxious Abe wanted to be certain.



Sometimes, it seems to me, it's not a *crisis* that shakes our faith. It's all those intervening years of *waiting*. Those long times in our lives when things just seem to drift. And maybe our trust in God begins to languish, and faith grows stale. Those years of nothing happening. Those conditions may cause our faith to wither and we begin to doubt.



"Step outside for a sec," God said to Abram. Now look up. See those stars?" Try and count them. So shall your descendants be." There's nothing like a good blast of awe and wonder to stimulate your relationship with God.

Lindsay and I are avid campers, and we love looking at the stars at night. We never cease to be amazed. One memorable viewing came just a few years ago. After I left my previous pastorate, we took a long-planned trip to New Zealand. The stars that appear there, in the southern hemisphere, are completely different.



One night, far away from city lights, I had to get up. I unzipped the tent, looked out, and saw the brightest night sky I have ever seen.

This is a picture of the Southern Cross, a famous constellation. If you draw lines that intersect between those four brightest stars, you get a cross. The Southern Cross appeared against the backdrop of the milky way, stretching in a brilliant line from horizon to horizon.

Moments like that make me glad to be alive! They remind me of God's grandeur, and my own smallness. How can we be anxious or fearful when we have a God like that?



Our theme for this second Sunday of Lent is "From fear to compassion." Abram was afraid. He had this anxiety that wouldn't go away. He was worried that God wouldn't keep the covenant God made.

But there's a more *startling fear* in our gospel reading. A group of Pharisees come to Jesus. "Get away from here," they caution, "for Herod wants to kill you." This is no niggling doubt, like Abraham's. It's a dire warning, a matter of life and death!

There's more than one Herod in the Bible, but none of them are great guys. And *this* Herod is not one to be trifled with. He's the fellow responsible for John the Baptist's beheading. This Herod, along with certain other leaders in our world, whom we are familiar with, thrive on fear.

"Better not hang around," the Pharisees tell Jesus. "Things might turn ugly."

But Jesus is *not* intimidated. “You go tell that fox I’m not going anywhere.” Calling Herod a fox is a cheeky move. One that could get Jesus into trouble.



If fear makes us pull back, hide, or run away, then Jesus does the opposite. Something else is motivating his behaviour. “Listen, I’m casting out demons, performing cures. Today, tomorrow, and the day after that. I’m going to do what I’m called to do.”

He is one determined guy! And guess what. It’s not *fear* that moves Jesus. It’s *compassion*! From fear to compassion. From heart-pounding anxiety to deep, intentional love.

“Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” Even a child can understand it: there’s a new way in the Kingdom of God, a new way of being in the world. And that way is one of compassionate care.



There’s a great image that Jesus uses in our reading when he compares his love to that of a mother hen. “How often have I desired to gather you ... as a hen gathers her brood under her wings ...”

I’m not sure why this image hasn’t become more popular. Could it be that chickens are not attractive in our culture? It’s true that not many people want to be called a “chicken.” To be chicken is to be full of fear. But Jesus turns that perception on its head!



By Alain Rouiller - Cascais Costa do Esteril 52, CC BY-SA 2.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=62137300>

This mother hen has a love for her chicks that is brave, fierce and unrelenting. This may not be the kind of hen you want to cross!

In fact it can be dangerous to come between any mother and her offspring. Maternal love is famously ferocious. A mother’s love for a child is stronger than the fear inflicted by any despot ruler.

And this is a picture of *Jesus’* love for his people. Including his love for you and me. It’s a love that moves him to extraordinary measures. Sending him to the cross. Never turning back from those he intends to save.



But now, how do *we* respond? What do we do with this love so freely given? And here’s where things get dicey. As it says in the Gospel of John: “He came to his own, and they received him not.” Here, in this gospel (Luke), Jesus laments the hostile reception he is given.

And when I say lament, I mean a strong sense of sorrow and grief: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those sent to you.” Can you hear the desire in Jesus’ voice? If only things could be different! We humans have a long history of turning our backs on God, rejecting God’s overtures of merciful grace.



Why do we do it? Why do we keep pushing away the very One who made us, and loves us? And forever seeks us? “How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!”

There it is, that strong, beautiful, motherly love, wanting to embrace and enfold, to gather her children, her brood of chicks, within her wings. Jesus longs to be in relationship with us. It’s where we’re meant to be.

But *instead* we run away. What keeps you away? Woundedness? Pride? Some unresolved anger? A long simmering grievance or disappointment? How long will you resist? When will you open your heart and soul to the healing love of God in Jesus?

“How often I would have gathered you ...” he says. Would *still* gather you. Even now, after all this time.



The hen gathers her chicks. And they find shelter under her wings. Safety from all that threatens in the world around.

But of course, chicks are also meant to grow up. And that means eventually moving out from that shelter to enter the world.

Sometimes I think we just want to stay where it’s warm and soft and secure. We’d like this to be even in our relationship with God. Just Jesus and me. No need to venture forth. Or step out into a dangerous world where the fox is waiting.

But is that any way to live – to be spiritually *juvenile* for the rest of our lives? Jesus’ love is meant to nurture and help us grow toward *maturity*. From the fearful little things we once were, to now fully-fledged people of faith. People who follow Jesus into the world, with courage and strength. Because we know his love stays with us. And his protection never fails.

In Psalm 27 we find these beautiful words. Listen to them and let them sink in:

“The LORD is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?
The LORD is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid? ...
Though a host encamp against me,
my heart shall not fear;
though war arise against me,
yet I will be confident.”

Those words about wars, encampments and enemies are especially relevant for us in this dangerous time.

Strengthened by God’s love, we find courage to be God’s servants in the world, bearing witness to God’s desire for justice and peace. We refuse to be overcome by hatred. We push forward in the face of resistance. We will not be deterred from God’s kingdom way. Which is Jesus’ way.



What is that way for you? What does it look like to live with the same compassion that Jesus lived with? How can we embody that, each one of us, in this time, in this place?

Fear is such a crippling thing. It stifles life. It keeps us hiding away. But *compassion* draws us out and sends us forward. It's stronger than fear. God's perfect love, it says in scripture, casts out fear. Even though the way ahead may be fraught with danger.

"Tell that fox Herod ..." (And you can substitute for Herod whatever stands between you and your loved ones.) "Tell that fox that I am on my way. Casting out demons that still plagues our lives. Healing the world of all its diseases. And there are many. In the power of Christ, we will not be deterred.



Once again this week, there is a question for you to reflect on. You can find it in your bulletin, and I hope you'll give it some time and consideration later today, and in the days to come:

Reflection Question: "Where are you standing at this moment? Not yet under Jesus' 'wing' or ready to step out from there without fear?"

May the power of God's love conquer our fears, diminish our worries, support us in our anxieties, so that, like Jesus, we may embody his fierce and determined love.