

**“Strength in a Time of Fear”**  
**John 20:19-31**  
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A couple of weeks ago I was awakened at four o'clock in the morning by an anxious German Shepherd panting in my face. Tusker, our male shepherd, had his front paws on my chest and he was clearly distressed. Fortunately, or unfortunately, it is an experience I have had before, many times, in fact, over the course of thirty-three years of having German Shepherds. So, while trying to calm him, I first listened for thunder - it can frighten a dog - but there was none that morning. I waited awhile and finally I heard it - the high-pitched chirping sound made by a smoke detector when the battery is running down.

They can only do this between midnight and four o'clock in the morning. I don't know how they make them to function this way, but they do. And there is nothing more terrifying to a German Shepherd, and probably to many other breeds, than this high-pitched sound. In the time it took me to locate which smoke detector had a weak battery, Tusker closed himself in a closet and knocked over an ironing board. This did not help. Then, he tried to crawl under our bed which did not work.

For some reason, our female shepherd was not frightened. She just looked at Tusker with curiosity, and he in turn, looked at her as if to say, “The world is coming to an end, you fool, take cover!” In truth, who knows what goes through their minds? They don't understand what the chirping sound is, but once fear takes over, nothing will help. Even when the sound is stopped – I replaced the battery - it takes time for the adrenaline and cortisol to dissipate and allow the dog to calm down. Fear is unsettling, immobilizing, crippling even.

Yet, it's not just German Shepherds and other dogs who experience fear. It is us too. And while we may laugh at the irony of a dog not understanding what a sound means, a lack of understanding

often contributes to our fear as well, and thus, we are unsettled, immobilized, crippled.

This is the condition of the disciples in the story we have read from John. It is the day of resurrection. Peter and the Beloved Disciple have seen that the tomb is empty and Mary Magdalene has talked with the Risen Christ. It has taken her awhile to recognize him, but since she has seen him die, we should cut her a little slack. How could he be alive? What tricks is her mind playing? Eventually she realizes it is him.

As we join the story today, it is evening and the disciples have locked themselves away in some kind of first-century safehouse because they are afraid. We don't know who is there, though we know Thomas is not. We know that Mary has told them about the empty tomb and talking to the Risen Christ, but we don't know what they make of these claims.

We do know whom they are afraid of – the Jews, John says, which means the Jewish leaders who have played a role in Jesus' death. But if they are worried about guilt by association and thus afraid that they too might die like Jesus, it is the Romans they should fear most.

In any event, they are afraid, terrified actually, as if they have heard a high-pitched chirping sound they don't understand but recognize as a threat. They have no idea what they are going to do next. They have all left many things to follow Jesus – work, families, friends, communities – perhaps they could go back and start over if they can escape immediate danger. But they can't even think about that now because they are overcome by fear.

It is how we feel now in many ways. We find ourselves locked away, just like those early disciples, and we are frightened by many things. COVID-19 is a lethal virus, no matter how much some people want to deny this. It may be more dangerous for older people and people with various preconditions that make them more vulnerable. But it has infected young and old alike, it has been brutal for young and old alike, and it has killed young and old alike.

Minor surgery is surgery that someone else has. Any surgery I have is significant. The same goes with this virus, except for the fact that if I don't take it seriously, even if I don't become ill, I may cause

someone else to do so. For many of us, the medical fear is not just for ourselves, but for people close to us who are more vulnerable.

Yet we're not just afraid of the virus itself, we're afraid of the economic damage it is doing. Millions of people have lost jobs or pay already. Many more will do so in the near future. And since no one knows for sure when we will return to some sense of normalcy, no one knows the long-term impact on economic realities which are felt more intensely by some – people with no safety net, people near retirement, people who were already struggling to make it from paycheck to paycheck.

Our government is doing some things to help, as it has in the past. We recall President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's inaugural address in 1933 in which he said we have nothing to fear but fear itself and then backed up the statement with a vast array of programs and initiatives. We made it out of The Great Depression. But anyone who lived through that period will tell you it was brutal. And while we can draw confidence from the past, it is no guarantee for the future.

And if all of this is not enough to unsettle us, we have daily reminders of how differently we view what ought to be a shared reality. There are wonderful stories about people coming together across differences. There are stories about the best coming out in people, businesses and churches. The best in our people has come out as we have cared for one another thoughtfully. Bill Simpson's story last week was magnificent! And I hope you saw the channel 11 story this week on Gerri Harris, our member who will turn 106 in October, remembering the flu pandemic of 1918 and urging people today to heed safety precautions.

But there are also stories of just how nasty people can be and how distorted they are in their thinking. People have hoarded for personal gain items ranging from personal protection equipment to toilet paper. Someone tried to sell a roll of toilet paper online for \$100! People have flagrantly disregarded safety measures, endangering the lives of others. In fact, some churches have done so and suffered mightily as a result. Some leaders have allowed political interests to outweigh human concern.

So, we are afraid of the virus, its economic impact and the way our differences are hindering us, and we may be afraid of what we might do if we have to live in close quarters much longer. Being forced to slow down and spend time with our families is a gift for now, but there may come a time when we are tempted to pull out each other's hair ... which may be "O.K." since we can't get it cut, but the bottom line is that we can identify with Tusker and the early disciples who are unsettled by fear.

But this is not where the story ends, with the disciples in fear. As the story continues, Jesus shows up bringing gifts of hope and peace. In the fact, the first and most significant gift he brings is himself. Jerry Maguire may have had Dorothy at hello, but Jesus has the disciples even before he says a word. To be sure, his presence startles them at first. Like Mary Magdalene, they know he has died, but here he is now, living and breathing, standing in their midst. But once they recover from the shock, they are filled with joy and peace. He is alive. Their hopes and dreams are not all lost. Hatred has not won out over love. And they are no longer alone. Jesus is with them.

And lest we think Thomas misses out on this experience, John tells us about his encounter with Jesus the next week. He experiences the same comfort the others do, and when he does, like them, he believes.

The message for us is that we are not alone in our fear, nor are we ever without hope. God is always at work bringing good things out of despair. We have seen this in people pulling together in this difficult time, using forced isolation as an opportunity for reflection and growth. And there is no place that is inaccessible to God. Wherever we are in terms of physical space, our place in life or emotional wellbeing, God is with us, ever seeking to bring hope. As the Risen Christ appears to fearful disciples locked away in a safehouse, the God who was in Christ comes to us today wherever we are.

This may sound obvious, but there are times when we function as if we think we are somewhere God cannot be. Sometimes it is a physical place, some context of suffering or hardship. Other times it is an emotional place, a time when we have done something we think God

cannot forgive or have given up on God. In either case, God is still with us and for us. The psalmist says there is nowhere he can go that God is not (Psalm 139). If he ascends to heaven, God is there. If he makes his bed in Sheol, God is there. In like manner, the message of the Gospel is that no matter what we have done, God still loves us. No matter where we are — physically, emotionally or spiritually — God is with us.

Jewish activist Anatoly Sharankysy experienced this reality as it enabled him to survive fifteen years in a hard labor camp in the Soviet Union. He was convicted on false charges of spying for the U.S. government, but survived his sentence by reminding himself that the Power in him was greater than the powers that had imprisoned him. His body might be imprisoned, but his mind was free. He was freer than his captors. When he was finally able to go to Israel, he told his story in an autobiography and chose a title that referenced the psalm he recited in the most difficult times — *Fear No Evil* (as retold by Harold Kushner in *Who Needs God*). He feared no evil because God was with him.

Jesus shows up and lets fearful disciples know not only that he is alive but that God is with them. It is a helpful word for us as we are isolated from each other and thus, tempted to think we are distanced from God. God is with us wherever we are, giving us strength, providing us hope and peace. Peace be with you, Jesus says to the disciples repeatedly and his presence alone helps them experience peace.

But one additional thing the Risen Christ gives the disciples in our story that we might overlook is something meaningful to do. “As God has sent me,” Jesus says, “I have sent you.” He gives them a calling, a purpose, a reason for being. This is a responsibility, something that enables God’s realm Jesus has brought near to grow. But it is also a gift because meaningful service takes their minds off their fear and turns them toward joy.

It’s a part of how the Lamaze technique of childbirth works. No man has any right to comment on such matters, I know, but I have used the technique when I had a surgical procedure on my foot without benefit of anesthesia. It’s a long story... But it’s not just about breathing patterns. It’s about shifting focus because we can only have one primary focus at a time. Shifting focus does not eliminate pain, but

it does make it seem more distant. In like manner, losing ourselves in service can enable us not necessarily to forget about our fear or grief, but to shift the energy in our lives in helpful ways.

So, rather than simply focusing on our fear right now and trying our best to find some way to calm down – like Tusker hiding in the closet or trying to crawl under the bed – we might put our energy into doing something meaningful like making phone calls or writing notes to people we are concerned about, giving money or food to those in need, making masks. There are spiritual practices that can calm us, and we should pursue these, but when we put everything we have into caring for others, we tend to lose sight of self-concern.

One person who did this was the Reverend John Lamb Prichard, a nineteenth-century Baptist pastor who served churches in Virginia and North Carolina, including First Baptist Church, Wilmington, during the Civil War and the Yellow Fever epidemic that took his life. I am indebted to John Smith who was FBC Wilmington's historian until he and Harriet moved to Raleigh. Prichard's story is remarkable and this is seen in many ways, but I am profoundly moved by these words from one of the last letters he sent his children before he died.

Wilmington has never appeared so desolate since we have lived here. I am truly glad you are so far removed from these sad scenes. The hand of God is in all these things. I feel just as safe here as anywhere else. I could get no nearer to God, except He should take me to Himself, where there is no war and no sickness. My times are in His hands. I would not have it otherwise... Try, my dear child, to realize the true state of things... should I die, trust I have given my heart to Christ and I should go to meet your sainted mother and dear little brother Jimmy... Don't be alarmed. We are just as near to God here, as we would be anywhere out of heaven. Let us humble ourselves before God and pray for his protection. I feel calm and resigned. I pray that God will bless you... I cannot reconcile it to myself to leave the many who must suffer, if someone does not attend them.

In a time of much fear, during a war and an epidemic, Prichard found strength in two things – his awareness of God’s presence and his calling to serve. Herein lies the source of our strength as well.