

Moving Out of Scare City: There is Nothing to Fear - *Joshua 1:1-11*

Norwalk Christian Church, October 25, 2015, Pentecost - Ordinary Time, Year B, Moving Out of Scare City Series 3

The wind. That's what I was scared of as a kid. Thankfully I grew up in Florida, not Iowa in the Fall, or else I would've had a terrifying childhood.

There was no rationale behind my fear. I was never traumatized by the wind. I think it all came from watching the Wizard of Oz too early in life, and fearing that the wind might blow me away to Oz like it did Dorothy. I remember as a 4-year-old, looking out our glass backdoor into the yard, watching the trees swaying, wanting to go outside and play, but wondering if it was worth the risk.

It's pretty silly now, looking back. Childhood fears are like that. They're irrational! They make no sense! But at their root, they're all about fearing the unknown, and the vulnerability that is required when faced with the unknown. I mean, who knows. Maybe the wind could blow you to Oz, or at least blow you to the next door neighbor's yard. Is it really worth the risk?

In our scripture today, we find Joshua and the Israelites standing a lot like 4-year-old me, looking out the window seeing all the beauty and fun ahead of them, but unsure if they can muster the courage to enter into this new land.

The land is, for them, abundance. It is what God promised, and what they had been journeying towards for so very long. They have finally arrived, and now they have to claim it. Enter into the land. And this brings a whole new set of fears.

After all, Moses, the one who brought them this far, is dead. It's Joshua's calling to taken them into the land. But can he do it? And what if the land is not as great as we think it is? What if it's all just a lie? What if we've come this far, only to be disappointed?

Soon, the Israelites will send out spies into the land. They will come back with reports of great beauty and abundance, but also stories of giants and other terrors. It's not worth it, some will say. Let's just stay here in the wilderness, make a home here. Abundance is not worth the risk.

Last week, as a part of our Litany we heard read to us words from Brené Brown's book *Daring Greatly*. I wish I could just stand up here and read you this book. It's so good--better than any sermon I could preach. The book is the results of a decade of research, during which she interviewed hundreds of people about their experiences with vulnerability and joy.

I won't read the whole thing--though I could--but let me read a little bit. She writes, "In a culture of deep scarcity--of never feeling safe, certain, and sure enough--joy can feel

like a setup. We wake up in the morning and think, Work is going well. Everyone in the family is healthy. No major crises are happening. The house is still standing. I'm working out and feeling good. Oh, <beep>. This is bad. This is really bad. Disaster must be lurking right around the corner."

Brown tells the story of a woman she met in her 40s: "I used to take every good thing and imagine the worst possible disaster,' she told me. 'I would literally picture the worst-case scenario and try to control all of the outcomes. When my daughter got into the college of her dreams, I just knew something bad would happen if she moved too far away. I spent the entire summer before she left trying to convince her to go to a local school. It crushed her confidence and took the fun out of our last summer. It was a painful lesson. Now I cross my fingers, stay grateful, pray, and try like hell to push the bad images out of my head. Unfortunately, I've passed that way of thinking down to my daughter. She's increasingly afraid to try new things, especially when her life is going well. She says she doesn't want to "tempt fate".'"

A man in his 60s told Brown, "I used to think the best way to go through life was to expect the worst. That way, if it happened, you were prepared, and if it didn't happen, you were pleasantly surprised. Then I was in a car accident and my wife was killed. Needless to say, expecting the worst didn't prepare me at all. And worse, I still grieve for all those wonderful moments we shared and that I didn't fully enjoy. My commitment to her is to fully enjoy every moment now. I just wish she was here, now that I know how to do that."

These stories, they break my heart. Because they are so real. This is life. This is what we do all the time. "It's easier to live disappointed," Brown writes, "than it is to feel disappointed. It feels more vulnerable to dip in and out of disappointment than to just set up camp there. You sacrifice joy, but you suffer less pain."¹

I grew up in a Christian faith that was full of fear. We always feared God would be disappointed with us and send us to hell if we didn't believe right or worship right. I remember being terrified as a kid of hell, much more than I was of the wind. Hopefully you didn't grow up with the disfunction I did.

But even still, it's so hard to separate fear and faith. They seem to go hand-in-hand. We go to church, just in case...Better safe than sorry, right? Maybe you've seen the info about our "Pub Theology" event next Tuesday. The idea of talking theology over a beer at the bar and grill down the road seems scandalous, doesn't it? It's okay to talk about football in such a setting, but God? That doesn't seem right. Won't God be upset?

¹ Quotes from Brown, Brené (2012-09-11). *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (p. 120-121). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

The faithful, we were taught, are the ones who are the most chaste, the most reserved, the prudish and the proper. The heathens are the reckless and risk-takers, who live life for joy.

Some of the most joyless people I've met have been Christians. Some of the most fake, hypocritical people I've met, too, have been Christians. And this is no accident.

Brené Brown's research showed that the most joyful moments in people's lives were the times they were the most vulnerable. Times like: Giving birth, falling in love, loving my job, getting engaged, going into remission, being happy.

Joy and vulnerability are inextricably tied together, and that's why abundance is so fearful. Because to really experience joy, you have to expose yourself, open your heart, and be vulnerable. And when you're vulnerable, you can be hurt--so deeply. And yet, only when you're vulnerable can you experience joy like no other.

It took sometime, by the way, for me to get over my fear of the wind. It didn't happen rationally. But somewhere along the way, we found a fix. A white hat. *This* white hat, actually. Well, this was version 2. The first one got lost somewhere, which terrified my parents, who quickly found this replica.

So long as I had my white hat on, I could muster up the courage to face the wind. I could go on walks around the neighborhood. Ride my tricycle down our driveway. With this hat, I could face my fears.

"Only be strong and courageous," God says. God didn't say be perfect. God didn't say never mess up. Just be strong and courageous. And sometimes, getting out of bed in the morning, is what strong and courageous looks like. Sometimes, it's letting your daughter go away to college. Sometimes it's knowing the worse could happen, yet taking the risk anyway. Sometimes being strong and courageous is putting on the white hat, pulling enough courage over your head that the vulnerability seems manageable, and taking that first step into the wind to face your fears.

There is one way of telling the story about life that is all about scarcity. There is not enough. There is so much to fear. It's not worth the risk. You better live right, or there will be hell to pay.

But there is another story. It's a story that begins poetically in a garden filled with God's abundance. An abundance that is squandered when the serpent convinces humanity that what they have is not enough, and that God is someone to fear, not trust. The serpent's tongue later speaks through Pharaoh, and then through others, time and again. But there's another voice speaking throughout the story--"Do not be afraid", the voice says. 365 times in fact (someone counted), God tells humanity not to fear. "Only be strong and courageous."

Occasionally, someone listens and learns to sing, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me.” But more often than not, humanity closes in on themselves in fear.

And then one day, in a barn, to a fearful young woman, God decides to enter into the world as a baby named Jesus. Maybe then, once I enter the vulnerability of their skin, maybe then they will know there is nothing to fear. And Jesus goes around, overcoming fears of demons and devils. Showing the people that disease and death, ultimately, have no power. Spreading his love and joy wherever he goes.

“I have come that you may have life, and have it more abundantly!” he says. But it sounds too good to be true. Life cannot be that good! God cannot love like that! God cannot love people like that! And so, in our fear, we kill him.

But three days later, he steps out of the grave, the most fearful place of all, and says it one more time, “Do not be afraid.”

Amen.