

“Fear Not: Fear’s Landscape”  
Judges 6:36-40

Today we begin a journey that I hope will help us deal with one of the strong forces in our human experiences: Fear! It is easy to speak or admit our basic fears, things like fear of heights, fear of snakes, fear of the dark, etc. It is much harder to recognize or admit our deeper fears such as our fear of failure, fear of not being accepted, or fear of being judged. Yet, there is great power for healing when we are able to recognize, admit, honor, and work through these fears. Here is a good example of why dealing with our fears is so important to our healing and the healing of our world. In his book, *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer tells the story of a shop teacher in a group he once worked with. The man was an impressive figure, six-feet-six and 240 pounds with an athletic build and deep voice. For some years, though, he and the school principal had been caught up in an escalating argument. The principal wanted the teacher to attend a training to modernize the shop, but the teacher insisted that all that stuff was just a fad. One day, Palmer says, the teacher arrived at the group to say that the cycle had been broken. The principle had made his demands, but this time the shop teacher responded differently. “I still don’t want to go to that institute,” he said, “but now I know why. I’m afraid - afraid I won’t understand it, afraid my field has passed me by, afraid I am a has-been as a teacher.” There was a silence, and then the principal spoke: “I’m afraid, too. Let’s go to the institute together.” They did, Palmer writes, and the experience reclaimed and deepened their friendship and revitalized the shop teacher.

This kind of awareness of our fears and how they motivate us is so important to our growth and wellbeing. And so today, we look at a biblical story of a man who was afraid and how he faced his fears. This story comes from the book of Judges. This is the period of history after the Israelites were delivered from slavery in Egypt by Moses, wandered in the wilderness for forty years and then entered in the land of promise. A few years had passed, and they had judges who were leading them. This was a period of about 300 years. The dominant pattern of the book of Judges is that people would do what was evil and then a leader would come and help lead them back to the ways of God. This is very much like the almost universal human pattern of losing our way and then having prophets and leaders help us back on the path. A lot of these stories need to be taken from the point of view of the people at the time and thus we have to focus on the important faith lessons that are given in the stories instead of getting stuck on the historical details or the claims that God would advocate for or promote violence.

And so today’s story is about one of these judges. His name was Gideon. He was called to be a military leader and a judge. But he felt ill-equipped. There was a whole landscape of fear in his life. Let’s consider a few of the fears he faced:

1. Fear of Inadequacy (Competence): Gideon was the lowliest member of the lowliest clan of Manasseh. He did not consider himself to be adequate for the call. This is a real fear for many of us. We develop this fear early on. Yet, Gideon had to trust that he could be a leader.

2. Fear of Being Abandoned (Acceptance): Gideon wanted to make sure that God was not going to leave him and that his leadership was going to be accepted. He was afraid that others might find him lacking.
3. Fear of Failure (Control): Gideon wanted to make sure that the results were going to be good. He did not want to lead his people to death. He wanted to ensure that his military campaign was going to be successful. He wanted control and so he set up several tests for God. He wanted clear signs.
4. Fear of Death (Survival): The opponents of Gideon and the Israelites were powerful. This was a huge risk for Gideon and his people. Gideon only had trumpets and clay pitchers with torches hidden in them. Thus, the risk was very high and his trust in God was to be totally based on faith and not on any sense of control or skill.

Let's listen to how Gideon prepared to deal with all of his fears for survival, acceptance, control, and competence. Gideon basically lived in a landscape of fear. He knew it all too well. He was aware of all the issues and challenges that faced him. In Judges 6:1 we are told that the people did what was evil in God's eyes. The frame of the story is that of a landscape of fear. Gideon explored all four human tendencies toward fear and instead of living with a risk management kind of mentality, he chose to live by faith and to do things that seemed foolish to the rest of the world. He risked his whole life and the lives of his people based on a wet fleece that he considered to be a sign!

Today as we journey through fear into faith, I want to invite you to familiarize yourself with fear's landscape. Fear is an important alarm mechanism that is part of our human experience so that we may survive and find ways to navigate dangers in life. But fear can also become a destructive force when we are not aware of its landscape and of its triggers within us. Just like Gideon, we have to name our fears and face them. A lot of our problems in the world come from the fact that we often don't realize when fear is motivating us.

Our world is full of fear and challenges. Now more than ever, we are aware of the fragility of human life. Yet, what is more dangerous about the threats of our time is the fear they are triggering within us. I invite you this week to read the news with these four fears in mind: Competence, acceptance, control, and survival. See which one or two are being triggered. Another challenge is to consider your interactions and agitated thoughts this week. Pay attention without judgment to these basic fears as they arise in you.

Once you recognize and name your fears, then you can offer them to God as they are, asking for guidance and help. This is not asking God to take away your fear because fear is part of life. It is instead about learning to not let our fears dominate the scene.

Repressed or unrecognized fears are often harmful to us and our loved ones. Repressed fears often blindside us. But when we recognize our needs that are being triggered by fear, we can then allow God to show us a path forward through love and faith. We cannot conquer our fears and we cannot avoid them. Our work is to engage them through faith

and a community of trust where we find our footing knowing that nothing in this life or in the life to come can separate us from the love of God.

This week as you pay attention to your fears and your triggers, I want to invite you to remember these words of faith from Romans 8:38-39. These are not negating your feelings and your worries. What I hope they will do is to remind you that you are never alone and that in light of eternity, all will be well.

Let's listen to these words with open hearts. I am going to repeat them three times and will invite you to let these words settle into your bones. "38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Amen.