

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles
Sixth Sunday After Pentecost – June 24, 2018 – SUMMER of HEALING
Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister
Mark 4:35-41

FOR REFLECTION

“You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself, 'I lived through this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along.'”

~ Eleanor Roosevelt, American First Lady (1884-1962)

“Fear keeps us focused on the past or worried about the future. If we can acknowledge our fear, we can realize that right now we are okay. Right now, today, we are still alive, and our bodies are working marvelously. Our eyes can still see the beautiful sky. Our ears can still hear the voices of our loved ones.”

~ Thich Nhat Hanh, Vietnamese Buddhist Priest (b.1926)

Healing Our Fears

The disciples had every right to be afraid. Their boat was sinking. And G-d was asleep. I have to admit that I too have doubts at times – and come to the conclusion that G-d is asleep – otherwise this horrible thing wouldn't be happening.

But when I can crawl back out of my reptilian brain (fight/flight/freeze) – my cerebral cortex remembers that G-d may have created the universe – but then it and we were set free. G-d is with us in those storms and tragedies – holding us close – hoping with us that life will prevail – even in the face of inevitable mortality.

I've learned – 63 years in – to ask for prayers and reminders from my Beloved Community that G-d accompanies my every breath. And those prayers reach in to my reptile self and bring her back out into the light and restore my love of a never sleeping G-d.

Faith doesn't guarantee a lack of fear. Fear is natural and a condition of our biological selves that keeps us safe and alive. The disciples had every right to be afraid. Half of them were fishermen – which tells me that this storm was violent enough to scare even them – which means this was a big one. They thought they were going to die. They'd be stupid to have no fear.

However, when fear becomes a conditioned response beyond the imminent danger – when we make life choices out of fear – then it becomes a liability – a disabling and

inappropriate response to circumstances. And that is when, not banishment of fear, but healing of our fears is called for.

We all have reasons to be fearful – and carry many of our fears from childhood into adulthood. There is fear of the dark, fear of abandonment, fear of being lost, fear of a new school, stranger danger, monsters under the bed. Many of these we outgrow or learn to manage. But the loss of a parent or sibling or friend in those early years can create lasting psychological consequences. Abuse, neglect, warfare, poverty, bullying, denial of very real gender-dysphoria, accidents, severe illness, actually getting lost or left behind by parents – these become actualized fears that live in our minds as part of our village. And those residents of our inner village need healing.

We can still be legitimately afraid of a nuclear strike by North Korea due to a tweet from our fearless leader. We are still allowed to be afraid of Global Warming's effects on our planet and a variety of other very real possibilities in these strange times. But we need to be able to mitigate those fears – without being limited by extraneous fears like Ga-ra-ras in the garage or lava flows in Los Angeles.

So how do we pry the hands of fear off the steering-wheel of our lives and get our broken companions into rehab? Some folks find courage in believing that Jesus is literally right beside them – wide awake and knee-deep in the same water – ready to protect and defend their every move. Some find relief in various forms of psychotherapy – changing behaviors or thought patterns – figuring out more appropriate responses to circumstances.

I've joked often enough about being on medication. But, like many others, my brain sucks up serotonin too fast – so I take a serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SRI) which allows me to choose my path in life rationally rather than in a panic. It's why I don't do the zipline at camp – as much fun as it looks – as it will leave me in a heap of anxiety needing extra medication. SRIs save lives! Thank you, Jesus – and big Pharma.

My mom had fears in her later stages of Alzheimer's that her beloved pets had run away and were lost. I would tell her I'd seen them back at the house and they were just fine. She would visibly relax. Stories are a wonderful way to heal our fears. We tell stories of people who have survived similar circumstances – stories of heroes of all genders and sizes coming to the rescue – stories of benevolent powers greater than our own that bend the universe toward justice and compassion and kindness and joy. These are balms for the soul, healers of memories, reminders that we are not alone.

I believe that the rise in Alzheimer's, Autism and other spectrum conditions are a biological response of the human body to the stresses of modern (or is this post-modern) life. There is so much anxiety-producing input from electronic sources and freeway driving and news outlets – it is no wonder that our brains are protecting us by

rejecting the input, turning inward, avoiding and numbing. If these are not forms of healing, they are at least forms of self-protection that work temporarily, if not permanently.

Silence and meditation (in church or beyond) – yoga and brisk walking – enough sleep and healthy food – gardening, labyrinth walking and restful reading material – hobbies that bring us satisfaction and joy – snuggling with our children or laughing with our life-partners – all of these simple things that we tend to neglect – these are healers, life extenders, fear diminishers.

And I've learned from experience that going to protest marches and voting at the polls can have a healing effect on my fears and grow hope in my heart.

I am still afraid of a lot of things – most of which I can now protect myself from. But my fears are driving my life less and less. They are my restless companions that need a bit of Reiki now and then – that work out their destiny in my dreams at times – that caution me at appropriate times and then curl up in my reptilian brain to rest. It is interesting that when my son is afraid, I grow more courageous for him. Perhaps it is the mammalian brain stepping into the breach to protect the young.

I wonder if our fears inspire greater courage in G-d –
We are the children of our Creator –
So it may be that G-d – feeling fear on our behalf –
also embodies the courage of a protective parent –
surrounding and holding onto us –
like the teachers at Sandy Hook Elementary School who took the shooter's bullets
trying to save their kids –
like soldiers trying to save a wounded friend under fire –
like strangers pulling people out of burning cars –
like first responders running toward the Twin Towers instead of away.

Our G-d is not sleeping while families are separated at borders.
G-d curls up with those toddlers under those mylar blankets –
and stands with those eight and ten-year-olds who have learned the hard way to
advocate for themselves.

Our G-d is not sleeping while young black men are shot down in our streets.
G-d cradles their crumpled bodies in gentle arms like their mothers have done over the
years –
and gathers the community in prayer in protest seeking justice and sanity.

Our G-d is not sleeping while the waters rise and swamp the islands and coastal cities with melted glaciers.

G-d stands wide awake and knee-deep in that same water –
yelling instructions to leaders of all nations so that they can stem the tide of greed and return humans to our original respect for Mother Earth –
sending all the warning signals that are divinely possible to wake us up, get us bailing out the boat, move us back to lives of balance and interdependence.

Our G-d is not sleeping in the pews of our religious palaces on Sunday mornings.
G-d is under bridges and on sidewalks and in refugee camps and detention centers –
blessing each child of G-d with hope and healing dreams –
turning fears into righteous anger –
and righteous anger into acts of resistance.

Our G-d is wide awake – right here – in this very room – in this very moment –
actively healing our fears – touching our hearts –
binding our wounds and binding us together for the common good.

Ga-ra-ras be Gone! G-d is with us! Blessed Be!

Scripture Reading for Sunday June 24, 2018 – Sixth after Pentecost – Year B

Mark 4:35-41

35 On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." 36 And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. 37 A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. 38 But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" 39 He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. 40 He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" 41 And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"