

When We Are Uncertain about The Future

Genesis 14:11-19

A young man tells of visiting a college, which had a series of security call boxes every few hundred feet or so. If you were wandering around the campus at night and felt uneasy about somebody following you, you could hit the button and summon a security officer.

On one of these phones hung a sign that said, “Out of Order.” Underneath it someone had scrawled. . . “Keep Running!”

Fear is a powerful emotion, isn't it?

All kinds of things can hit our panic button. “Fear not!” is one of the most common expressions in the Bible. The very first time God says “Fear not” to anyone in the Bible is in our lesson for today from Genesis. It comes at an interesting time.

Abraham has returned from a tremendous military victory over four kings from Mesopotamia. These kings had banded together for the purpose of military conquest and had kidnapped Abraham's nephew Lot. Abraham is not only successful on the battlefield against these four kings and their armies, but he is beginning to acquire both wealth and stature in this new land to which God has called him. Still, despite all his accomplishments, his heart is uncertain about his future and uncertain about the God who called him.

You know what that is like? Is anyone here uncertain about your future, maybe even worried? It is not unreasonable in today's world. Some of us have been saving for retirement. We know that Social Security will not provide enough income for the rest of our life. So, we have been saving and investing. But will it be enough? How will we ever keep up with the pace of inflation? And so, we become fearful.

One reason Abraham was uncertain was because he and his wife were childless. For people in the ancient world, childlessness was particularly difficult. This was an agrarian society. Children were needed to help gather crops or tend animals. Children were the means of carrying on the family line and preserving the family inheritance. Even more important, not having children made people very vulnerable in their old age with no one to care for them. And there would be no one to look after the funeral rites when you died, rites that were seen to secure your soul's rest in the life to come. Not having a child and thus an heir weighed heavily on Abraham and Sara.

Abraham was uncertain about his future. We can relate to him, regardless of age or station in life. For teenagers, it might be uncertainty of moving to a new school. Will the students there accept me? For those getting near to the end of high school, it might be, “Will I get accepted at the college of my choice?” And for those getting ready to enter the work force, “What kind of job can I possibly get in today's economy?”

It doesn't get any easier in adulthood. “What if the company lays me off? The people I'm working with seem to get younger. Do they look at me as an old fossil, no longer able to hack it? My family seems to be coming apart. What if I end up alone?”

And then there are the uncertainties of aging. “How long will my health hold out? Can I make it without being a burden to my family?”

Every one knows what it is to be afraid. Anxiety has been called “the official emotion of our age” and it can be an awful emotion.

Fear is a universal emotion. Of course, some people have more to fear than others.

Knowledge, however, is not always a cure for fear. I can give you all kinds of accurate information about the things of which you are afraid, but it might not help you overcome your fears.

I would like to say that knowledge is a powerful weapon against fear, but that is not altogether true. I know of only two ways to deal with fear.

The first is to face up to your fears. That is what researchers have discovered in trying to help people with phobias. They call it Exposure Therapy carefully exposing people to the very thing they most dread can help them overcome their fears.

Have you ever known someone who was afraid of going to the doctor because of fear they were sick and they didn't want to have their fears confirmed? How counter-productive. You may not be nearly as sick as you think and if you are, for heaven's sake, begin treatment. Running away from your fears is a terrible way to cope with them.

The first way of conquering your fear is to face it. The second is, fall back on your faith. “The word of the Lord came to Abraham in a vision: ‘Do not be afraid, Abraham. I am your shield, your very great reward.’” After hearing Abraham's statement of uncertainty over his childless state, God takes him outside and says, “Look up at the sky and count the stars if you can.” Then God said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” And the writer of Genesis records, “Abraham believed the Lord . . .” That's a life-changing statement of faith: “Abraham believed the Lord . . .”

Do you believe God? Do you trust God? Sometimes mistaken ideas about faith and about God can cause us to be afraid.

It is sad that our faith, rather than giving us comfort, can sometimes add to our distress. A person that has not experienced God's love and comfort in their life is afraid. A mature faith understands that though life is difficult, we are never beyond God's loving and gracious care.

Abraham looked up and counted the stars and knew that God was with him. Of course, you can't see many stars when you live in a city. But we can see enough, to remind us that God is with us. Fear Not.