

"Fear of Faith" A sermon based on 2 Kings 5:1-3; 7-15, Psalm 111, and Luke 17:11-19 delivered on October 12, 2025, by Rev. Alison Andrea Young at The First Congregational UCC of Onekama, Michigan on Homecoming Sunday.

“We have nothing to fear but fear itself” is probably the most famous utterance by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. He stated this during his inaugural address on March 4, 1933, at the beginning of his presidency during the Great Depression. This saying is expressed in another almost opposite way by the cartoon character POGO, who once famously declared: “We have met the enemy, and He is us!” Cartoonist Walt Kelly coined the phrase for an anti-pollution Earth Day poster in 1970 and used it again in a special comic strip created for Earth Day 1971. The saying caught the collective imagination of the public and is still used today. We can, at times, be our own worst enemies as we become victims of our own fears and our own egos. Fear paralyzes us—it can make us forget our own God-given abilities and, sometimes, just the opposite, exaggerate them due to false pride.

The Hebrew scriptures use two words for “fear.” The first word, *yirah*, designates the kind of fear that occurs when we are in great awe of something. This fear is the one denoted in our Psalm from this morning, Psalm 111, as “fear of the Lord.” Here in verse 5 the Psalmist tells us that the Lord provides food to those who “fear” him, and in verse 19 the Psalmist reminds us that “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” This fear is not terror or timidity. This fear goads us on to keep our covenant with God and to “follow his precepts.” The second Hebrew word for “fear” is *pachad*. This kind of fear is debilitating. It makes us cower in timidity and hide. It is the kind that paralyzes us and keeps us from any kind of action, good or bad.

While our passage from Second Kings does not use either of these words, the story of Naaman’s healing illustrates the fear of a privileged man, in seeking

healing, feeling like he is “stooping down” to receive that healing. Naaman was insulted that Elisha, the man of God, did not make a big production of providing the cure for his leprosy and he turned away angry. It took the wisdom of his faithful servants who believed in Elisha’s simple cure, for Naaman to follow through. His anger and his rage were getting in the way of his healing because of his misguided fearful pride. His faith in the man of God was firmly established when he went back with his whole entourage to thank Elisha.

Fear and Faith. Faith and Fear. When you use the Women’s bathroom (or if you’re a man, peek in when it is unoccupied), you will see a saying hanging on the wall. It says, “Faith: Worry Ends Where Faith Begins.” Because I practically live at the church and my office is downstairs, I frequent this facility often! Now worry is a nuanced form of fear, and it is the one I know best. I often wake up at 3am and worry about numerous things and that worry makes fear blossom in my heart. I have a prayer that I say slowly and meditatively that helps: “May I be safe, May I be Healthy, May I be Happy, May I Live with Ease.” (Learned from well-known meditation teacher, Susan Salzberg) And then I say it as a prayer gift for anyone else that comes to my mind through the Spirit. The prayer is a way to send my faith to the rescue! But, I also have to say, it does not completely banish my worry.

Kimberly Vaughn who writes a Blog called [The Connection: Connecting Women with God and Each Other](#) recently wrote about the question of whether faith and fear can coexist. She had heard a DJ on a Christian radio station say that they could NOT coexist and she was not convinced. This made me think about the saying hanging in the Women’s Bathroom downstairs with which I am not sure I totally agree.

Ms. Vaughn tells a personal story of a summer of endless medical tests and waiting and the fear and worry that accompanied this uncertain time, as well as the times she was “fixed on the promises and character of God.” She says of that time:

We all face fear. Even the most faith-filled and influential Christians experience times when they are afraid. The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians: “***I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling...***” (1 Corinthians 2:3). If this giant of the faith was not exempt, then clearly no one is.

Can a believer have faith and still experience fear? Yes! This is why there are so many scriptures that speak to fear. God knew this would be a reality we would face, and He wanted us to be equipped for such times.

Yes, the biblical witness is full of times that God and Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, admonish us to “Be not afraid.” Some 110 times as a matter of fact, if we include “Fear not” and “Do not fear.” to be exact, not 365 as a popular social media Meme would have us believe. It stands to reason that our divine guides are totally cognizant of human fear and its detrimental effects on humankind.

The Greeks only use one word for fear “*Phobos*” from which we get our English word “*phobia*;” so the Christian scriptures have to use modifiers to let us know what kind of fear to which they are referring. However, my particular kind of *bete noir*, as I have mentioned, worry gets a really great Greek word “*merimnaho*” which in addition to worry, can mean “concerned, anxious, and have care about something.” *Merimnaho* literally means “divided into parts and drawn in opposite directions.” Worry can certainly feel like being attached to a medieval Rack torture device, can’t it! Worry can tear us apart. We all can immediately think of Matthew 6:27 in this context, “Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?” And then just a mere seven verses later; “Therefore do not worry about

tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” You can say that again!

Back in Jesus’ day if you had leprosy, you certainly were fearful and full of worry. Not only were you sick with a nasty skin disease that could eat away parts of your flesh, but you were also a pariah and shunned by the community. The gentle approach of the ten lepers and their heartbreaking cry from a distance to Jesus was a perfect example of faith overcoming fear, if ever there was one. The question has always been, why did only one return to thank Jesus. And, was that the only one whose faith healed him? I don’t think so. I think they all had faith that they would be healed by Jesus, but maybe the other nine were afraid to go back to where they had been, afraid that the community might not accept them back into the fold. The Samaritan, a foreigner, would be going back to Samaria, and not Galilee and so he had the luxury of turning back.

On Friday Letitia James, Attorney General of New York, made some remarks after her indictment in Virginia. She said something like she was not afraid of this charge that she says is incorrect and that as a woman of faith she knows that faith and fear could not abide at the same time. I hope that is true for her, but I know that they can sometimes bump and bubble around in my soul together, especially at 3:00 in the morning!

Like FDR’s statement about fear and POGO’s about where lie the enemies that we fear, one of the scriptures that has always comforted me is from Hebrews 11:1 from my mother’s Revised Standard Version of the bible that she gave to me before she died: *“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”* This is a double-edged comfort in a way. Sometimes things that we can’t see can bring fear into our hearts, so it is the assurance of the things hoped for that will come with the unseen that gives us the comfort.

I would like to think that worry will end, as the plaque in the Women's restroom seems to be saying, when faith begins; but worry has not left me yet and my faith began a long, long time ago! I am a self-admitted woman of deep faith which dances in and around that worry. Perhaps we need to come up with another saying! Amen.

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