

Brentview Baptist Church
Living Beyond Fear – Part II

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Introduction: So have you picked up your masks yet? The head of the World Health Organization says the world now stands on the brink of a global pandemic. Quote *“I have decided to raise the current level of influenza pandemic alert from phase 4 to phase 5.”* Swine Flu has officially arrived. I’m thinking my brother-in-law, who recently got out of pig farming, timed that pretty well! Scary stuff.

Apparently were not lacking any reason to lose a few sleepless nights these days. The war on terrorism continues to be battled, the slow economy, or for many, the economy bust continues to wreak havoc, I guess just the other day one of Canada’s largest auctions was taking place north of Edmonton...large construction equipment, oil patch gear, etc was all being unloaded due to the slow down...I even saw a Ferrari being auctioned off there.

But you know what I find so intriguing in all of this...how political parties and their strategists take full advantage of these issues and the related fears. We have seen this demonstrated as recently as both our last two elections in the US and Canada. You see they, of all people, know how to take advantage of fear, utilizing on the ability to capitalize on the power of fears, which can make a huge difference at the polls.

In 1964, Lyndon Johnson was running for president against conservative Barry Goldwater when his campaign unleashed the "daisy ad." It showed a little girl counting as she plucked a daisy, charmingly mixing up her numbers.

Then a baritone voice takes over, counting down to an overwhelming nuclear explosion. It's followed with a warning that the stakes are too high not to vote for Johnson. The ad, which ran only once, was so chilling and effective, analysts say, it helped Johnson win the presidency by one of the widest margins in U.S. history.

Today they continue to do research on hundreds of volunteers where they discover that even something as simple as an ad can trigger a response in the part of the brain called the “amygdala”, which experiences emotions such as fear. When it is aroused, it overrides logic, which is a great advantage for trying to get your party elected, or your point of view accepted...great...“override logic” not one of our most glowing strategies is it...but yet a reality.

I said it last week, and I will reiterate it again, many believe that, *“The biggest virus were going to have to face these days is fear!”* The reality is there are few emotions that are more debilitating than anxiety, fear, or worry, which is why I believe, it’s the most frequent command found in all of Scripture, because God never intended for us to be so gripped by fear that we become faithless, and miss out on the adventure God is calling us to.

That is why my hope and prayer is that together we can all learn to live beyond fear, and answer the issue of how one goes from fear-based living to faith-based living because we were never created to be paralyzed by this emotion. We were never created to live as sociologist Barry Glassner describes in his recently published book called “The Culture of Fear” where in it he states, *“We live in a culture of fear. We’re the most worried society that’s ever lived...”* and that was before all these recent world events.

How contagious is fear? Just take note of how between 1990 and 1998, the murder rate in the U.S. had declined by 20%, but murder stories on network news had increased by 600%. Fear sells folks. Millions of books get sold every year about future disasters that we’re told are imminent. Have you heard of the new movie coming out, depicting the end of the world in “2012”? We are saturated these days with fear inducing media. Bowling for Columbine was just one more example.

And it’s not just the Media’s fault, a number of us learned about fear from our families. We were conditioned to fear when we grew up. Do you remember what your mother told you as you ran out the

door...*"Take risks honey? Embrace danger. Look just one way when you cross the street, and don't be afraid to get dirty."* No, usually we were told, *"Be careful. It's a dangerous world out there."*

I often reminisce with my brother how in our childhood we used to bicycle anywhere growing up, we could be gone for 5-6 hours, halfway across Winnipeg, without a second thought from our parents, try that today? And we didn't have cell phones for our parents to keep in touch either. It's hard to live beyond fear, not just because we live in a culture of fear, and not just because of our own backgrounds, but there's another factor. There's actually a physiological component to fear. That's right, for some of us it's hired-wired into our bodies.

There are chemical things that go on in your nervous system when fear gets produced, and it happens to all of us, but now they've discovered some people actually have a genetic predisposition to fear, which means they are going to struggle more with anxiety and worry throughout their lives. That's right...it's a "worry gene".

Yes those professionals that map genes have labeled it SLC6A4 gene on chromosome 17Q12. People that have a short version of this gene are actually more likely to worry than people who have a long version of it. So...now that you know that...how many of you are worried that you might have the short version?

It's quite clear, given the world we live in, even our wiring patterns, fear will be a factor in our lives, and the truth is life on its own does not tend to produce courageous faith...that takes some incredible effort on our part, and as we saw last week, it was never God's intent that we live in chronic fear, and that fear is generally a result of increased vulnerability and a diminished sense of power...in other words...

When I have no idea when and where the next terrorist attack will hit, or who might cough on me that recently was working on their tan in Mexico, or what day my boss might hand me a pink slip, and are basically powerless to do anything about it, the result will be fear. Yet God doesn't want us to live like that, so God says, **"I'll be with you."** All through the Bible there are these wonderful words from God.

For instance, in Isaiah 43, God says, ***"Fear not, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. You're mine. When you pass through the waters, you will not be destroyed. When you pass through the rivers, I will be with you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned...Do not be afraid, for I am with you."***

God gives this command with this reassurance over and over in the Bible, because God wants us to live beyond fear, so He promises to be with us. **But here's the primary point this morning: For the vast majority of people, simply hearing that God is present, as wonderful as that is...**

It is not enough to enable most of us to overcome patterns of handling fear that are real and deeply ingrained in us. I see this in quite a few aspects of people's faith journeys especially in light of addictions or behaviors that are negative like fear.

It's almost like we have this religious magic expectation, which believes God works in a religious magical manner, which is rooted in our belief that God performs miracles, which He does, and He may very well choose to intervene, but unrealistic expectations coupled with an absence of sustained spiritual disciplines leave many of us very vulnerable to returning to the same old long-term patterns, even after we have given these issues over to God, or prayed over them.

Simply coming forward at an altar call, or rededicating our lives is great, but it's not enough. To often this type of magical belief system puts God on the hook for more presence and more intervention than God even promises Himself. God doesn't simply place us in this cosmic microwave and then zap us with superhuman spiritual energy...no a life with God through Christ is transformative, but it doesn't re-engineer our genes or radically alter our temperaments, in the end belief in spiritual magic has a huge potential to damage people

Thus becoming a champion fear-manager requires more than receiving information, it requires action, action of faith, and that is why fear is designed to lead to action. Fear is designed to be a self-correcting

response. It's similar to hunger in this respect. The purpose for hunger is that you realize that you're hungry, and thus you're motivated to eat...so you're not hungry anymore, a self-correcting response. Fear is designed to be a self-correcting response, an alarm to let us know that there's danger, that something's wrong, and hopefully motivate one to take action so that the problem is corrected, and you're not afraid anymore. That's the purpose of fear; but what happens generally in our day is fear immobilizes people, or we end up avoiding it altogether completely. Allow me to share from another personal example, but first I want to begin by saying "thank you" for the leadership and membership of this church for allowing Pastor Dave to have a sabbatical leave...this is a good thing.

As I alluded to last week I stepped out of paid ministry over three years ago, and it's only recently that I have begun to understand some of the reasons I allowed fear to infiltrate my life to the degree it did. Now I don't want to sound like a whiny ex-Pastor making excuses for clergy, and I know that every job has its share of fear producing moments, but that is the life experience I can speak from at this time...so I will.

Fear began to wreak havoc on my self-image, and like countless other clergy, I felt that I was not qualified to fulfill the expectations that ministry demanded. Now whether they are my own perceived expectations or those created by people in the church, it doesn't matter, but I did not see myself as qualified to be a theologian, a counselor, motivator, encourager, a preacher, teacher, a CEO, administrator, friend to all, someone with all the answers, someone in control of their own life and families life, and a spiritual prayer warrior to boot.

Today when I walk away from a construction site, at days end I can see what I accomplished...when you work with people rarely do you see a job finished...people whether you know it or not you are an ongoing project and concern.

And anyone with a heart will struggle with the impact they are having on people, and the capacity for fear to infiltrate is huge...and than fear begins to distort, even becoming chronic, even toxic, and instead of enabling us, empowering us to take action, it paralyzes us. It can cause a grown human being to freeze in terror, literally physically, but even more dangerously emotionally and psychologically. A principle by the way that terrorists depend on.

In fact Mayor Guilliano of New York back in 2001 had it right when he said the best thing New Yorkers could do at the time of 9-11 was to continue with life, come out from hiding and face fear head on, words echoed by many other leaders, otherwise the terrorists would have been even more successful. Why do you think Franklin Roosevelt in one of his speeches stated, *"The only thing we have to fear is fear itself?"* The power of fear is incredible!

It's the principle I want us to understand this morning, that moving from fear-based living to faith-based living involves taking a step of action towards facing what I fear. It requires acting as if I trust God, even if I feel fear. It means approaching what I fear rather than avoiding it, maybe even taking a wise, God-honoring risk. So my goal this morning is that by the end of this message, you will identify at least one area in your life where fear is holding you back from experiencing the fullness of life God wants for you, and once identified, that you'll resolve to take one action step, one act of trust in God.

So how do we start? First let's get a better understanding of what this avoidance looks like, that which keeps us trapped in fear. For it is in avoidance that we seek to escape anxiety and worry by evading a problem rather than facing it, hoping it will simply vanish.

Do you realize the very first recorded human response to fear was avoidance? It's found in the Book of Genesis in the Bible. Fear was non-existent until Adam and Eve first chose to sin, and suddenly fear rears its ugly head. When God first approached Adam and Eve after their ill-fated choice, God asked, **"Adam, where are you?"** This is Adam's response, ***"God, I heard you in the garden, but I was afraid and so I hid."***

Now Adam could have courageously gone to God and said, "I blew it God; he could have simply owned up to his actions, but fear demonstrated what it would do for countless millions following that momentous event, send them into hiding, which really didn't solve anything. But we all tend to do it, so let me give you

a few of the forms that avoidance tends to take and see if you identify with any of them. **The first form that avoidance sometimes takes is procrastination.**

It works like this: There's a phone call I need to make, but it's going to involve unpleasant words. Because I don't want to face the unpleasantness of it, I put it off. Now the longer I delay, because I know I should be taking care of it, the more unpleasant it becomes, and so the more I put it off, and in this vicious cycle I may even find myself just hoping the other person moves away, or even worse, so that eventually I just won't need to make the call, but, of course, life doesn't generally work out that way. But that's the temptation to avoid having to face up to what I am afraid of by procrastinating. Anyone here ever fall into this trap?

The second form that avoidance takes is denial. This is where I just pretend like something doesn't bother me, or I try to get distracted by thinking about something else. Case in point, researchers did a study of people who had symptoms that they were afraid had been caused by cancer. They found that not only were these people often not going to the doctor, these people were less likely to go to a doctor than people that had no symptoms at all. Why? Because they were afraid. Afraid of what? Afraid that they might be really sick, that they might have cancer.

The irony of course, is that the best chance of effective treatment lies in early detection, which is the one thing they make impossible by their denial, by thinking about other things, and pretending everything is okay. So we simply avoid fear by avoiding the issue, and we do this in numerous ways, television, drinking, keeping really busy, whatever it takes. Anyone hear fall into this trap, or do you prefer we simply change the subject?

The third form avoidance takes, which is no more productive than the other two, but we all tend to do it, is indecision. For example, the individual who is afraid to make a decision about a career path because what if they choose to go down the wrong one? That would be horrible, so they just don't make a decision. What if they choose the wrong school to go to? What if they make a commitment to marry the wrong person, and so on? Decisions go unmade for weeks, months, even years. How many of you are ever indecisive? How many of you aren't sure? Maybe you'd like a little more time?

So here's the deal with avoidance: Avoidance is tempting to us...because it promises short-term relief from our anxieties and fears but it's a long-term prison. It doesn't solve anything. Not only does it not solve anything, but as soon as I choose avoidance over coping, I'm announcing to myself that I can't face reality. I can't handle it. It's like the movie "A Few Good Men". Where Tom Cruise is interrogating Jack Nicholson on the witness chair, and Tom Cruise says, "*I just want the truth.*" Remember what Jack Nicholson said? "*You can't handle the truth.*" Well, that's what the evil one whispers to us to trap us in fear: "*You can't handle the truth.*" How different it is with Jesus, who stated, "***You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.***"

You have to decide, whom do you trust? "You can't handle the truth" or "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free"? For Jesus says, "**There is no truth that you and me, together, can't handle.**" Whatever the truth is, be it about the state of your heart, about the state of your life, your health, the state of your job, or your finances, your nation, or about the state of your relationships – there is no truth you and I, together, cannot handle." "***You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.***"

But fear and the evil one are whispering, "*You can't handle the truth. You've got to run and hide.*" Adam and Eve you disobeyed God, you better hide. Isn't it interesting when the Bible tells people to "**fear not,**" generally God's not saying to them, "*Try to make the feeling of fear go away?*" No generally what's happening is God's calling people to take action, to trust him, because He understands how fear can hold them back from doing it.

God is saying, "*I want you to obey me in spite of your fear, I don't want you to wait until the fear goes away. I want you to obey me now. I want you to take a step of action now. If you trust me, if you obey me,*" God says, "*You will experience my power at work, and you will discover that you are not vulnerable and powerless in your world. But you can't wait for the fear to go away. You must act in faith.*"

People this is a very important principle when it comes to fear. You must face the fear directly and take a step of action towards it. Almost always in scripture when God says, "**fear not,**" that's what God is asking a person to do. I want to show you this in the life of the man named Elijah; Elijah was a prophet of God, not somebody incapable of courage. Now in Elijah's day, a powerful queen by the name of Jezebel had led Israel into idolatry.

She is recorded as one of the most evil and formidable characters in the Bible. Her husband was King Ahab, who also was evil, but was largely influenced by his wife. Together they led the cult of Baal, which had some very wicked practices associated with it. In total we are told there were 450 priests that led the people of Israel away from God and toward the worship of Baal. Elijah couldn't stand that, and neither could God who called Elijah to take a stand and so he did.

When Elijah lined up all the prophets of Baal on one side with himself on the other side, he then proceeded to ask the whole nation, "**Choose this day. How long will you waiver between two opinions? If Baal is God, serve him. If the lord is God, serve Him.**" Then he challenged them to have Baal actually take action, and Elijah prayed likewise for God. The whole cult of Baal including the prophets was destroyed that day because of the courage of this one man, Elijah. But alas, he too was vulnerable to fear, for after all that happened Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah and said, "**May the gods deal severely with me if, by tomorrow, I don't have you killed.**"

The gods? You mean the ones who couldn't bring down fire, the ones proven false? It was a deciding moment for Elijah. Is he going to approach his problem or avoid it?

Listen to what the text says: "**Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba, he left his servant there. He went a day's journey into the desert. He came to a broom tree, sat down under it, and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, Lord," he said. "Take my life. I am no better than my ancestors.**" So which would you say Elijah did? Approach or avoid?

He couldn't cope. This is the ultimate fear," *I can't cope. I can't handle it. I have had enough.*" This is a classic example of what worry and fear do to the human mind. Elijah stated, "**Take my life. I am no better than my ancestors.**" Where did this come from? Fear and worry. They cause you to start thinking in a distorted way that ends up attacking your own self. Where did God ever ask Elijah to compare himself to his ancestors? Where did God ever ask me to compare myself to my peers? Where did I get the idea that I had to measure up to them one way or another?

But worry does that to you. *"I'm not good enough. I'm not strong enough. My life is not productive enough. I can't cope with this. I won't be able to figure this out. This will be overwhelming to me."* Fear had gripped the mind. If you continue to read this account in 1 Kings 19 you discover that God doesn't shame Elijah for his response. In fact God sends an angel to Elijah, and Elijah lies down and sleeps for a while. He wakes up to find food that was provided by the angel, and then instructed to rest some more.

He basically treats Elijah like a toddler— have a snack, take a nap, and then I'll talk to you, and then God leads him further into the wilderness, to a marvelous scene where Elijah experiences an earthquake, a mighty wind and fire, within each of these expecting to hear God's booming voice... But nothing, nada, zilch...but ultimately he hears God in a still, small voice...and that day he learns that God is with him, and God wants to deal with his fears. So how does God expect Elijah to deal with the fear? Well it goes against all three avoidance tactics.

God doesn't tell Elijah, "*You know, Elijah, you're right. You can't handle this. You just wait up here on the mountain, and I'll go take care of Jezebel, and I'll take care of all the things that create fear in you. Then when it's safe, and all your problems are solved, you can go back into life.*" "Now don't get me wrong, that would be nice if God would do that, but God rarely does.

Here are God's first words to Elijah, "**Elijah, you must go back the way you came.**" (1 Kings 19:15) In other words, "Go back down the mountain and face the same set of problems that you ran away from, because they're all still there. Jezebel is still there, and she's just as difficult as ever. Her personality has not improved at all." You see what God tells Elijah in this story is generally what God's telling you and me, "My plan for you," God says, "is not that you run away from what you fear; it's not that you'll be air-lifted

out of it somehow, have it magically removed, neither is my plan for you to bury your head in the sand and pretend its not there!

My plan for you is that you shall overcome it when you act in faith, and when you act in faith, when you take one step of faith towards me and deal with that which you're most afraid of, you set in motion a spiritual dynamic that is very powerful, and you will see my power at work in your life, and your faith will grow stronger, and your confidence will grow. But that kind of confidence and faith and strength will not be produced in you if you don't have the faith to face what it is that you fear, together with me. Friends God was not asking Elijah to stop feeling afraid; He was asking him in the midst of your fear will you trust me? Will you do what I tell you to do?" and Elijah does, he goes back down the mountain, going the same way he came. Oh, he's still in trouble, and Jezebel is still after him. Ahab is still evil, but the one thing that's changed is Elijah, who now says to himself, *"I can now handle this with the help of God. I have enough power and strength, and together we can do it."*

Elijah is discovering that a partnership with God is a good thing. It's like the mouse that teamed up with an Elephant – yes I know a very odd pair, but the mouse rode on the back of the Elephant everywhere it went. One day they come across a swinging bridge across a great ravine, a scary situation, but proceed to make their way across. Now that bridge began to sway and swing, creak and crack, back and forth, but eventually they made their way across, in which the mouse loudly exclaims once they reach the other side, *"Boy did we make that bridge swing."*

In comparison to God's strength and might folks, we are miniscule, but one of the wonders of God's word are all these promises that relate to our teaming up with our Creator, and when we climb aboard in faith, than look out...that bridge is going to swing!

A moment of confrontation with Ahab comes two chapters later in 1 Kings 21. Will Elijah shrink back? Will he be afraid? Will he soften what he says; the way people often do, to try to stay on Ahab and Jezebel's good side if he can? Will he be politically correct? No, in fact he says very courageous things. He says to Ahab, *"You and your wife, Jezebel, are headed on a direct course with destruction because of the evil of your hearts. You're on a collision course with God."*

He says it with enormous, breathtaking courage, and because of Elijah's courageous obedience, he inspired a whole nation and protected the people's faith. It's remembered and celebrated to this day, thousands of year's later, faith overcoming fear.

Only because God said to him at a great crisis moment of his life, *"Go back the way you came"* because God knew the bigger concern here, more so than even Jezebel's and Ahab's evil, was Elijah's heart. If Elijah had stayed on the mountain until he felt courageous, he'd still be there. You must act in faith first. Here's our story: Every one of us, like Elijah, comes to God with fear- everybody in this room.

Maybe your fear involves an external risk. Maybe it's a calling to a new ministry you've never been involved in before, or maybe God is calling you to a new job or vocation. Maybe the fear is internal, the fear is related to your finances, or your health, and you're really scared. Maybe God is calling you to reveal yourself to another person and be truly vulnerable?

Maybe God's calling you today to acknowledge the truths about you're sin, an addictive behavior and that terrifies you.

Maybe God is saying it's time for you to get really serious about you're spiritual search, and you're afraid of where that will lead, or what God may ask of you. Maybe you've given up on yourself, and fear is rendering you powerless.

Just remember as a general rule, God does not say to human beings, *"Okay, I'll take away whatever it is that frightens you, you're right, you can't handle it, and so I'll make things safe for you."* No as a general rule, God will ask you, as he asked Elijah to go back towards what you are running from, face it head on and together we will handle it.

So here's the deal for this week...I want you to take appropriate obedient action that you have been avoiding in some fear-filled area of your life. Maybe God is telling you, your nap and snack time is over, you have to go back the way you came, otherwise you will be hindering your own personal growth,

limiting your potential for faith to grow, giving fear more of your life to take a hold of, whereas God is desiring that your faith gets built, and your strength developed, but only if you move towards your fears.

If you try to avoid or escape, it doesn't do its work in you. So here's your assignment for today: I'd like to ask you to identify one area in your life where you have been troubled by worry or fear these days. Then I'd like for you to decide, this morning, what is one step, one behavioral, concrete step that you can take towards constructively addressing this problem? Having a conversation? Writing a note? Learning something? Making a phone call?

Then I'd like to ask you to make a commitment that you will take action between now and next week – you will take one step, however small – one step of obedience and faith to God. Instead of worrying, take action. Take one step towards facing your fear and it will release the power of God in your life through faith in a way that nothing else will. Just remember, as you do it, God will be with you. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr said *“Take the first step in faith; you don't have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step.”*

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