

For most of my life, I was very used to the feeling of fear.

I vividly remember, as a child, feeling a bone-wracking fear of my own death for the first time. When I got older this morphed, was joined by, a fear of meaninglessness, the possible purposelessness of existence; I had a fear of spending a lifetime trapped in an unbreakable cycle of work and consumption, earning and spending, I was afraid of wasting my life, I was afraid of running out of time to get it all figured out, I was afraid that *all this* might just be pointless.

... not that anyone really would have known. Like many of you, I'm sure, I learned pretty early on to keep my fear hidden. I learned to manage my fear by staying busy and distracted, and so, most of the time, my fear got shoved into a dark corner somewhere out of the way. But, it lurked in the background, and it kind of controlled most of my decision-making to a greater or lesser extent.

It was only when I started to really explore the Christian faith, that I noticed how that fear I was desperately trying to ignore, squash, obliterate, eliminate ... that fear is actually crucial; fear is a crucial part of what it is to be human, and of what it is to be a Christian, but not fear *alone*. What became brilliantly illuminated for me by the Christian Way is that the full human experience holds within it oddities like this, the full human experience holds within it inescapable paradox and contradiction, and to follow Jesus is to become acutely aware of this over and over again.

Our faith, bound as it is to Jesus' story, finds its *becoming* - and has the power to transform - only through the embracing and the awareness and even the embodiment of the many dimensions of lived experience that Jesus' story holds.

I truly believe Scripture is intended to be inwardly digested *so that* we might encounter the living text as fully as we can, and that means mind and body, the emotions, and very real human-ness it speaks of, and to.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus is told of a very real threat against his life, Herod, a member of his own Jewish community, yet embedded in the oppressive and dominating Imperial system and loaded up with all the power and access to violent methods of control he needs, Herod is looking to kill Jesus.

Fully human, we've got to assume that Jesus felt in his body the lurch of fear, anxiety, and dread that inevitably comes with a real and credible threat to your life, yet the conviction of his response reveals something else is present, too. Because of his human nature, Jesus would have felt the bite of fear, and yet he's not cowed by it, he's not controlled by it, he doesn't yield to it. Instead, the fear he surely felt *activates his courage*, courage to resolutely affirm his call and continue on.

Being fully human and fully *alive* we, all of us, have the capacity to feel more than one thing at any given time, feel opposing emotions at any given time, we are, as humans, 'both *and*,' and this is the great paradox of being human, demonstrated and exemplified in the personhood of Jesus. Jesus shows us that courage and fear can coexist, not only can they coexist, but courage can *be* because of fear, courage is really dependent on the presence of fear.

As we spend time with Jesus' story we will encounter a range of apparently contradictory emotions and responses as we follow Jesus to Jerusalem, and this is brought into sharpest relief as we continue on, all of us together, to the cross, to Jesus' gruesome execution, to the empty tomb, and ultimately to his resurrection:

That there can be courage through fear;

possibility in uncertainty, curiosity amidst feelings of being lost and having no direction forward;

There can be profound life-affirming connection running through aloneness/loneliness;

a grounded-ness in divine truth in the midst of terror;

and there can be life in death.

*Can be.* Cultural habits of thinking can have us narrow our awareness, tricking us into believing that we must either be afraid or courageous, when in fact both can be true – but it can take practice and intention to widen perspective and to trust that this is possible, not just for Jesus, but for every human life.

Lent is a whole season of paradox, of apparent contradiction, a wilderness season of abundance, a liberating season of self-discipline, a season of letting go so that much may be gained. It's a season which, if we journey through it all, intentionally and together, if we refuse to look away, if we refuse to see only one small part of it at a time and instead choose to be open to it all, mindful of it all, our journey to the cross can help us catch a glimpse of the massive insuppressible power of a single human life, when it's lived in its fullness.

Attempting to push away or deny the discomfort and inevitable suffering of life can be the thing that keeps fear our constant ruling companion. And fear is kinda biased, it has us notice largely only what affirms its presence, justifies it hanging around and playing a nagging role in our decision-making and our actions in the world

... and this completely prevents us from coming to know the life-giving potential, the power, that's held in the fullness of every moment, in every one of life's episodes, the good, the bad, and especially the ugly. Fear, uncertainty, loneliness, terror, grief, death, none of it is ever the whole story, none of these embodied experiences should ever have the last word. And for us, as followers of Jesus, we're promised they don't.

The story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is an invitation to open *wide* our perception of reality. To never deny the heavy toll of human suffering, but to also not be ruled or controlled or limited by it, the fear of it – the victory is to see it all, to see that there is life in death, joy in despair, connection in our aloneness, possibility in uncertainty and, perhaps most crucially, courage in fear.

Our weekly Sunday celebration of Jesus' resurrection, of new life, of the new creation can only make full sense when held alongside Jesus' suffering, isolation, derision, grief, fear, and death, the fullness and the complexity of the co-existence of it *all*. Jesus leads us into fullness of life by teaching us to perceive more fully, so that we *all* can live out our vocation, our call, participate fully in the new creation - without cowering, or recoiling, or hiding, without changing ourselves or the course of our lives in response to our fear.

Fear of fear, fear of the discomfort of fear, it changes us, it separates us - from God, and from each other, and fear alone will inevitably prevent us living the life that longs within us to be lived. Fear alone knows only to scratch and claw for survival, as it limits and restricts our choices and our actions. Jesus came for so much more than our survival, Jesus came that we might have life, and have it in abundance.

So, bring your whole selves here, commit to the full, strange, complex and paradoxical journey all the way to the cross, so we might find new meaning together in our weekly Sunday celebration, so we might each get a little more free from fear, and so that we come to know, through the fullness of Jesus' story, that life is more awe-ful and meaning-ful, faith-ful and beauty-ful, delight-ful and wonder-ful than we could ever hope or imagine. Amen.