

What are you afraid of?

One morning this week I woke up with a cricket in my ear. It was a very disconcerting experience, but fortunately not a frightening one for me. I remember carrying a weta that I'd found in the wood pile into the house as a child, and discovering that my mother was more afraid than fascinated by the creature I had discovered.

Some of us are scared of creatures: spiders, creepy crawlies, mice.
There are other things we tend to be afraid of as humans.
Things we have been afraid of, or things we fear right now.

The fear of people who are different to us.
The fear of change.
Fear of the future of our fragile planet.

Some of those fears move us to action:
we are moved to make welcome the stranger,
to include those who live on the edges of our community,
to work to end global poverty,
change our habits of consumption to better look after our planet.

And then there are fears that tend to freeze us.
Or keep us awake in the night.

The loss of employment. The death of a loved one.
Loss of ability or memory, loss of health.
Not being included in a friend group.
The prospect of being alone.
Not making the right decision.
Not having enough money for the bills.
Not having enough money for retirement.

Our fears might change as we age, but for most of us there are things we fear,
things we worry about at every stage of life.

Do not be afraid.
These are words we hear announced by angels.
Fear not, they say.
Do not be afraid.
Jesus says this as he appears to his disciples after his resurrection.

Resurrection life is life in which we are no longer dominated by our fear.

This is the same life that Jesus speaks of in this morning's Gospel passage.

First a brief aside.

Those of us raised in the church,
can easily overlook how scandalous this statement is.
“I am the Good Shepherd”.

The shepherd is about as far away from stately majesty,
kings and rulers,
people of power and influence,
as can be.

But when Jesus talks about himself as the shepherd,
he is identifying with a not very powerful,
not very respectable,
occupation.

The verse immediately before this description
says very clearly what Jesus is about:
“I have come that you might have life,
and have it abundantly”.

Abundant life
is not a life full of money
not a life full of things
but a life full of freedom:
freedom from fear.

Abundant life is life that grows out of God’s promise
to be a shepherd who will be with us
and for us:
protection and presence.

We read/sang Psalm 23 this morning and I want to turn now to look at the Psalm
to see what it might help us understand about the Good Shepherd.
It is probably the most well-known Psalm, used at funerals and weddings,
and many of us have a favourite version of it.
I want to particularly talk about the last half of the Psalm this morning,
and particularly the last verse.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil;
for you are with me; your rod and your staff – they comfort me.
Presence and protection.

Though the staff might have been used to pull a sheep out of trouble or danger,
the rod wasn’t for rebuking wayward sheep,
but for fighting off anything that came to threaten the sheep.
You are with me; your rod and your staff – they comfort me.
Presence and protection.
No need to be afraid.

And then that beautiful image:
surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.

Joel LeMon helps us understand this verse better.

“The word “follow” here (radaph) is better translated “pursue,” a surprising verb given that it is usually the enemies that are pursuing the psalmist with an intent to overtake and destroy. Furthermore, in this same verse, the word “surely” (‘aq) is better translated “only.” Thus it’s not the enemies in hot pursuit. Instead, “only goodness and mercy will be chasing me down.”¹

Not only do we have the presence and protection of the shepherd
we are being pursued by goodness and mercy.

I have been thinking this week
about why goodness and mercy need to pursue us.
Is it that we move so fast,
talk so fast,
assume the worst so fast,
hurt others so quickly,
that mercy has to hurtle down the road,
chasing us down,
calling out to us
what we have left behind in our haste to move on?
Do we dodge God’s goodness,
thinking we are not good enough,
not deserving?
Or maybe it is that God’s goodness
will change us when we are caught by us,
will teach us to live our lives
by laying them down for others
following the pattern of our Shepherd.
Whatever it is,
I am so grateful that we are being pursued.
Pursued by goodness and mercy,
doggedly pursued
but even moreso graciously pursued.

Goodness and mercy all my days
shall surely follow me.

Amen.

Thanks be to God.

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3646