“*What Shall I Fear*”

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What do you fear and why do you fear it? At the tender age of 68, I have reached a point where most of my fears have been put to rest or become things that I am simply cautious about. There are a few which remain for no rational reason. One of these is spiders. I don’t fear all spiders. I actually like the hairy ones, commonly called hunting spiders. I’ll pick up a wolf spider or a tarantula and play with it. It is the shiny black ones that I particularly fear. I always give them plenty of room.

Through most of my life, I have been a risk taker. I have enjoyed doing things which have a measure of danger attached to them. Now these were not done foolishly. They were done with the recognition of the possibility of danger, but a danger that I felt I could manage. I have raced cars, gone sky diving and enjoyed scuba diving, even diving to depths of 300 feet. None of these activities ever caused me an existential fear.

I also enjoyed rock climbing and mountaineering. I got started with a rock climbing club at Michigan Tech University. From this I moved on to mountain climbing, starting with easy climbs and eventually climbing Mount Rainier in Washington State. A potential tragedy fortunately averted by good guides was the first time I ever felt faced with death. This was the last time I ever climbed a high mountain.

The fear of death had come on me and while I never lost the love of adventure, my adventures became less risky. With the arrival of my first child, I realized that I had an obligation that necessitated being a lot more careful with my life. My wilderness adventures were now restricted to back packing, which I loved and enjoyed for the rest of my life. Eventually I was able to enjoy this activity with my younger son, Andy.

There are stories in the Bible that are almost universally admired and liked. The nativity stories found in Matthew and Mark, which we heard last week, are perhaps number one among these. There are other parts of the Bible which are difficult to understand. And, there are passages in the Bible which are difficult, even disturbing to hear. Our text for today, Hebrews 2:10-18, is one of these.

This text is about Jesus’ suffering and death and why it was necessary and even fitting. Since the time of the early church until today, it has been difficult for people to accept the necessity of Jesus’ suffering and death to achieve our salvation. There are even people who reject a God who requires such things. In the early centuries of the church, there were heresies that taught that Jesus was not really human. They taught that he only seemed human, that he only seemed to suffer and die, that he was really a spiritual being.

We might wonder why this text is read only one week after the joyous celebration of Jesus’ birth. After all, it sounds like a text that might better be assigned to Easter. But here is the place it should be. The story of Jesus’ birth is more than a nice story about the birth of a child. It is the beginning of the story of the arrival of the incarnate God who came among us in human form to achieve our salvation.

People often ask, “Why couldn’t God save us through his divine will? Why did he send his son to suffer and die?” Other people say, “A God who sends his son to suffer and die cannot be a God of grace and love.” Today’s text answers and refutes these statements. In God’s creation, it was through humans, Adam and Eve, that humanity fell into sin. For this reason, it was fitting and necessary that a human should lift humanity out of sin.

In verse 10, we see that “It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings.” In this verse, an argument for using the word “pioneer” can be made, but a better translation might be “author”. Similarly the word “perfect” might better be translated as “pure”. So, we have God making “the author of their salvation pure through sufferings.”

In the Old Testament, Aaron was purified by being sprinkled with blood so that he could act as the high priest of the Hebrews and offer a sacrifice of atonement for their sins. In verse 17 we see this is exactly why Jesus needed to be purified, “so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people.” By being human in every respect, he could represent all of humanity before God.

But why did Jesus need to suffer to be purified? He suffered not because God caused him to suffer, but because suffering is the state of humanity in a sinful world. So as a human he suffered. He was tested by his suffering. Through the power of the Holy Spirit Jesus remained obedient to the Father and free of sin. Having experienced this testing he is able to help all of us who are experiencing testing.

Finally, why was it necessary for Jesus to suffer death? As the high priest of the people, Jesus offered himself, the perfect sacrifice, for the atonement of our sins. Through his death and resurrection Jesus overcame the one who has the power of death, Satan, and forever freed us from slavery to the fear of death.

What do you fear? Are any of you afraid of spiders or maybe mice? How about the dark? Are you afraid when you can’t see what’s around you? I think we all have our little fears that we may have carried down from our childhood. Usually the fears don’t test our faith, we don’t look on them as threatening our existence.

Do you fear suffering or death? These existential fears can lead us to do things that can threaten our faith. I think any sane person does not look forward to suffering or death. But do you fear suffering or death so much that you would question God’s ways or abandon your faith? Satan has no power over us that we do not allow. Satan’s only instrument is deceit. When we allow our fears to become overwhelming, we are susceptible to Satan’s deceit.

Do I fear suffering? Yes, but not to the point I will question my faith. We need to understand that in a sinful world there will be suffering, caused by our own choices or by the choices of others. Suffering is not to be sought or desired. But when we suffer we are tested. In suffering, will we persevere in our faith or abandon the God whose grace promises us salvation?

Do I fear death? No! That does not mean I seek or welcome death. The lord of this world, Satan, has been defeated and has no power over me by the threat of death. As death entered this world by sin so it has been overcome by the Lord of creation. Death is but a moment between this world and the world to come. For this reason, I exhort you not to be tested by fear of death, but to always persevere in the Lord.

Our Lord was tested by suffering and death, but through the power of the Holy Spirit he persevered remaining obedient to God. In the same way when we are tested by suffering and death, we may persevere in obedience to our God by calling on the Holy Spirit. God, who has made all that exists, has a plan for history. This plan is for the salvation and flourishing of humanity in a world where pain, suffering and death no longer exist. This is the gift secured by the divine human whose birth we have just celebrated.