

The Bald Truth About Fear

Matthew 10:28-31

Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

Being bald, I hear a lot of bald jokes: God made a few perfect heads; the rest he covered with hair. Once you go bald there's no growing back. I think I must be going bald: It takes longer and longer every morning to wash my face. And last but not least, what do you call lice on a bald man's head? Homeless.

Actually, if you have a bald head and don't want to go through any of the currently available methods for reforestation -- typically summed up as "drugs, rugs or plugs" -- you may be better off simply to embrace your baldness. That's what John Capps has done. Capps is the founder of Bald Headed Men of America, an organization whose 35,000 members have sprouted from 50 states and 39 countries. That organization holds a convention every September in -- where else? -- *Morehead*, North Carolina. The three-day event features clinics on bald-head care and awards for the Sexiest Bald Head, the Most Improved Bald Head, the Most Distinguished Bald Head and so on.

In our text, Jesus says that the "hairs of your head are all counted." Granted, counting the hairs on my head is less time-consuming job than counting the hairs on some other heads. Jesus wasn't trying to be funny here. He was talking quite seriously about the reality that people who follow him might be rejected and persecuted

But Jesus then told his followers not to fear; in fact, he told them they should not fear because *God has control of the future*, and they should not fear because *God also has control of the present*.

In reality, though, isn't "not fearing" more easily said than done? FDR famously

declared, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself," but who among us can turn fear off when it has us in its grip? And it matters not whether what we fear is terrorism, illness, bad things befalling our children or the collapse of our retirement savings. During the last recession, one of the call-in news shows had a woman on the line who said that the dive in the stock market and the beating her retirement funds had taken had her *literally* trembling with fear.

The disciples of Jesus may be afraid because Jesus was sending them out into the world that is sometimes hostile and where the unexpected is always lurking around the corner. Jesus said don't fear those who could harm their bodies, but those who could hurt their souls were to be feared.

Jesus isn't saying that all we have to fear is fear itself, but rather to "fear that which is truly deadly." He's talking about what truly matters, and about the importance of taking the long view: The worst thing that can happen to us is not death itself. We all die sooner or later, and death of the body is only temporary because our bodies are temporary. Our lives are in God's hands, and God will take care of us in life and in death.

Fear is mostly involuntary and the fear of something is unavoidable. When we feel threatened, we fear that which threatens us. There've even been studies that report that realistic fear appears to be healthy for a person. Moderate levels of fear, for example, have been associated with better adjustment to surgery than low or high fear levels.

But fear can also paralyze us and cause us to panic and react in ways that make things worse. Jesus' instructions to his disciples invite us to let a little heavenly light shine on our earthbound fears. That will not cause us to put all our fears behind us, but it can lower the level of terror inherent in the situations that frighten us.

And we should distinguish *between being afraid and being fearful*. We have little control over feelings; they simply are what they are. But we have choices about our attitudes and how we will live. Feeling afraid is a normal response to a perceived threat. But being fearful is an attitude toward life.

A man we'll call Jack used to manage a church camp, which was a popular site for not only summer children's programs but also for church retreats the rest of the year. The camp was situated in a heavily wooded site, and the main lodge sat a considerable distance from the house where Jack lived. To keep expenses down, the camp did not keep the lodge lit and heated except when it was in use. In winter, with the early dark, Jack often had to walk over to the lodge in darkness to turn the lights on and the heat up in preparation for a church group to arrive.

Most of the time, Jack was already busy somewhere else in the camp when it came time to turn the lights and heat on, and he didn't want to take the time to go home and get a flashlight. So he would walk to the lodge, seeing only by whatever moonlight there was. Jack says that when he arrived at the dark lodge and was ready to open the door, there was always a moment of uneasiness. The lodge was not kept locked, and it was always possible that someone was inside, up to no good. That thought always crossed his mind, and it was a realistic possibility. But always, after recognizing the fear, Jack told himself that such a scenario was very unlikely, and that he'd never had any trouble before. He'd open the door, reach around to the light switch and turn the hallway light on.

For Jack, at least, that fear was real, but his decision to go into the lodge anyway mean that he was choosing not to act fearfully. He refused to be paralyzed by his fear.

Preacher John Killinger tells of a man who was a gunner in the nose bubble of a B-17 airplane during World War II. The man was in that part of the plane as the pilot was landing on a narrow strip of jungle. Suddenly, the gunner saw that there was a ditch across the runway. "I knew it was curtains," he said. "I tried to warn the pilot, but I couldn't speak fast enough. When I finally switched on the intercom, I knew the pilot had seen it. He was praying 'God, don't let me panic, don't let me panic.'" Somehow, the pilot managed to bounce the plane on the ground and into the air again, leaping the ditch. The gunner says that he has often thought of that prayer and prayed it himself in the years since. He prayed not for anything tangible, but just not to panic.

We who follow Jesus ought also to remind ourselves that the things we fear are never the final word on our lives. That's what Jesus was telling the disciples as he sent them out into dangerous situations. We can imagine several of them praying a similar prayer: "God, don't let me panic," and it must have been answered, because they all went forward. Jesus assured them that God, whose eye was on even the sparrow, who knew even the number of hairs on their heads, would not desert them.

The same is true for all of us who walk with Jesus. Nothing can separate us from the love of God, not even fear itself, and not even the frightening things that actually happen to us.

And there's no coming over that fact.