

Overcoming our fears

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, July 19, 2015.

But immediately he spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Mark 6:50

You may have had the experience of being startled at the sight of someone suddenly appearing in unusual circumstances. The gospel story is about the disciples being terrified when they see Jesus appearing to walk on water. For someone to walk on water is simply not plausible to the 21st century mind. If it actually happened, it is a true miracle. A miracle by definition defies scientific explanation. There have been attempts at explaining how such a phenomenon could happen. Some suggest that Jesus was walking in shallow water and only appeared to be walking on the water. We don't know. While miracles defy scientific explanation, the more we learn of the science of today's world, the more we realize what we don't know.

I sometimes hear people say that they can't accept anything that cannot be explained and that science has the answers and if not now, there will be answers to everything. If ask for an explanation of what it means to love someone the answer is that it is a chemical reaction that affects the emotions between two people. That does not begin to explain the meaning of love that two people have for each other.

We used to think that matter was solid, now we know that atoms move about in empty space producing a powerful energy force that can be harnessed for good or evil. There is still so much about the unknown that we can't comprehend that leaves us in fear of what we don't know or understand. It is further aggravated in effort to explain things based on false assumptions.

Each day the morning news brings us another story of someone arrested for minor traffic violation that ends in a death. Too often we turn on the news or pick up the paper to read about yet another shooting of a gunman in a theatre or school or military base. Violent deaths are not limited to bad neighborhoods and high crime areas anymore, they also happen in upscale neighborhoods.

Because service men and women are seen as targets for terrorists they are warned not to wear their uniform out in the general public. It leaves us wondering if there is anywhere we can go that is safe. It is when we are afraid of the unknown that we realize how very fragile we are and that we are not in control as much as we like to think. Isis or Isil is now thought to be more dangerous than Al Qaeda with both terrorist groups feeding on unstable personalities seeking an outlet for their anger and insecurities. Those who commit violent acts causing injury and death often turn their gun on themselves. This would indicate that they had some sense of reality leading them to realize that what they were doing was wrong and avoided prosecution by ending their own life.

Our fears increase with every act of violence that is largely invisible and beyond our control. It is in the chaos and confusion of not being able to control our destiny that we realize our dependence upon God. Faith helps us to face our fears, whether a job loss, a failing marriage, financial loss or a terminal illness. Faith and fear are both responses to what we don't know. We are released from our fears when we get beyond our need for control.

Our hope lies in the trust and confidence that enables us to live with what we don't understand and over which we have no control. Hope is based on the trust that God will see us through what we haven't the courage to face on our own. Discerning the presence of Christ in a crisis situation has a remarkable effect on us. That is what the ministry of presence is all about. It gets us through difficult and challenging times as God breaks through our uncertainty to be our companion along the way. We all have those times in which God may seem very distant, leaving us feeling alone and afraid. It happens when we are

distracted by fear of the unknown when we are unable to sense God's presence and feel terribly alone. I have made it through losses in my life through the presence of caring and supportive people who were there for me. It was their presence that was more helpful than anything they said. You don't forget things like that. When I had a heat stroke at the end of a road race, I spent a week in a windowless room of an intensive care unit and lost all track of time. I was so distracted by conflicting emotions that I had little or no sense of God's presence. It wasn't until after I recovered that I realized that God had been there all along.

We may wonder where God is in the random acts of violence and terrorism that cause the tragic loss of innocent lives. The increasing enmity of extremist religious groups and unstable minds leaves us in fear of where they might strike next. Once at the border between Lebanon and Northern Israel I saw border guards standing around cocking their rifles as if they were looking for an excuse to use their weapons at the least provocation. Nearby was an inscription from the prophet Micah carved in stone that read...and they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war anymore. Who knows how many innocent lives could be saved if all sides took that passage seriously?

The insidious nature of terrorism precludes being able to fight it with conventional methods. In a war against terrorists, the more threats are eliminated, the sooner they are replaced with more fanatics willing to give up their lives for their cause. Despite our increasing attempts at security, we have no real assurance that we are safe from terrorist violence. The evil work of religious extremists has gone on far too long with no end in sight. If we lament the violence committed by Muslim extremists, what we hear from Christian extremists is equally appalling.

What Jesus would do? We can be sure what Jesus would not do. He would not harass single moms or LGBT people or picket their funerals. He would not shoot anyone, join a militia, own a weapon, or hate his enemy. He would not disdain the poor for their poverty or side with the rich.

We can't help but wonder how those who believe in the same God as we can be so violent. We pray that God by any name looks with compassion upon all innocent victims of violence and will move the hearts and minds of those in power to cease and prevent all forms of violence.

We mortals are defined by the fact that we have a beginning and an end. It is what we do in the great meantime that determines what kind of people we are and will be in the future. We pray that the present generation can learn to resolve differences in non-violent ways. Working together, we can work through our fears to the possibilities of resolving differences without resorting to violence or war.