

Sermon *Fears Change as we Age*  
The Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels, 9.17.23

My wife Christi and I went on a date Thursday night. We went out to dinner and then wanted to watch the bioluminescence in the waves on the shore of Anna Maria Island. This means we would be home when it was dark. Ethan was out that night too so I told Elijah that he would be home by himself until maybe 9:30. He seemed rather giddy at the prospect of having the house to himself for several hours. This is a change. I remember when he would not have been so excited for us to leave. I mentioned this change to him and he said it's a normal part of growing up. He then referenced a sermon he heard at his school's chapel program that talked about how our fears change as we age.

It makes sense, fears do change as we age. Since I was intrigued at this, I decided to read some articles about it. As it turns out, there is a quite a bit of research into it. In the article, *Fears Change as we Age* by Jerry Kennard, Ph.D, he writes that childhood fears tend to be age-specific and fairly predictable. As a child gets older, the nature and intensity of those fears often diminish. And while many adults leave behind common childhood fears, most of us never leave behind the memory of those fears. Here's what we know about the changing patterns of fears and phobias over a lifespan.

- Infants fear two things: sudden noise or loss of support. Their reaction to this fear will result in rapid opening and closure of the arms and crying.
- From about six months, children may show fear of strangers, heights, masks, and being separated from parents.
- From the age of 2, children begin to comprehend their lack of control over many situations. This results in fears of imaginary creatures, thunder, trains, or large animals.
- From the age of 3, active imagination is well established. It becomes a fearful time for many children, with monsters, burglars, being alone, the dark, and scary places high on the list of fears.
- From the age of 5, fears become more concrete in nature. Five-year-olds will fear getting lost, or hurting themselves, or losing their parents.

He also pointed out that children may show fear that is out of proportion to actual danger. In comparison, older adults have increased worries about the possibility of falling and being less able to meet commitments. Also, older people often experience a greater sense of vulnerability so things like heights or big crowds become more of an issue.

In the article, *What to Know about Fears in Older Adults*, the author, Carmelita Swiner, MD, writes that as older adults deal with frequent changes, they can become more anxious. Some common triggers for older adults include: Loss of independence (including a result from a fall), isolation, end-of-life planning, and grief and loss. Her suggestion to remedy fears as we age is to create a social and mental support network. Family, friends, and people nearby that you trust can be a helpful resource for you to turn to when you feel yourself losing control. She also wrote that staying active will help to manage your stress levels as well as creating an active, balanced

lifestyle with social interaction and hobbies you love can reduce stress and anxiety. And to go to church. Okay, I added that last one in; but, church is a great place to have a social and mental network to help us deal with fears. Interestingly enough, school is where children learn to work through their fears with others in a supportive environment with friends. It seems that we need to continue with a school-like atmosphere as we age too.

You might wonder what in the world this has to do with today's Scripture lessons. Let's take a look at Exodus. Two weeks ago, we heard about the birth of Moses, last week was the call to Moses from the burning bush, and this week, crossing of the sea on dry land. All of these events deal directly with Moses' fears. Remember that infants have only two fears: sudden noises and lack of support. Moses was born, put into a watertight basket, and sent down the river. Ever been in the bottom of a boat on a river? It's nosy. From the rushing of water, to the wind, to brushing against reeds and even rocks. Baby Moses must have been very scared of those sounds. He also lacked support. The basket must have rocked back and forth and at times dropped down from even the smallest rapid. Each time, I see his baby arms reaching instinctively up but no one was there to hold him or comfort him. What a fearful time – and, what a way to welcome someone to earth.

His cries were heard and a woman rescued him. Finally, he was held, comforted, quieted, and fed. Then came fear of strangers – he was raised in a foreign home (the Pharaoh's mansion) with all sorts of odd drawings on the walls and even people in masks. Again, a fearful time. One of the main fears of middle-age is the fear of looking like a fool. When Moses was in his mid-life he tried to start a rebellion and no one responded. He ran away, far away from water, by the way, to raise his father in law's sheep. Fear of looking like a fool...

Then God spoke to him. He gave all sorts of excuses which, to me, sound like he's being honest about his fears. He said: I can't lead – they won't respond. I can't do public speaking. I don't even know your name. Each time, the Great I AM responded with I AM with you. I AM enough. God was working through Moses' fears. The ones he remembered from his childhood and the ones he had presently. In this week's lesson, the people did respond to his leadership. They followed him but the Egyptian army is pursuing and now he's trapped, by water. Either he looks like a fool and is captured or he faces his fear of water – the one fear from his childhood.

Remember the advice to help us with our fears as we age? Surround ourselves with a support network. Moses had that. He had Aaron and Aaron's sister, Miriam. And God. And his staff. Someone – probably Miriam (the sensible one) – told him to reach his staff out and the waters will part. I imagine Moses sharing with them emphatically: I hate water. I can't swim. My support network reassuring him and, because of their support, he raised up his staff and the water started to part. It took all night by the way. Our fears don't just immediately get up and go, sometimes it takes time. But, eventually, they were walking on dry land, out of bondage into freedom.

Peter, in today's Gospel lesson, had some fear. Let's rewind for a moment. At the beginning of the chapter, the disciples asked Jesus who of them (the twelve) were going to be the greatest in

the coming Kingdom. To be specific, they most likely wanted to know what the pecking order was – Peter first, then who, Andrew, James, or John? Jesus told them that greatest in the Kingdom is a child. This may have brought up some fear in Peter. The fear of missing out; the fear of being left behind; the fear of what-will-the-neighbors-think; the fear of looking like a fool – one or more of those could have been going through Peter’s mind. With all those fears, Jesus focused the conversation on to forgiveness. In today’s lesson, Peter was still wrestling with the fear of being in control (or looking like a fool or what-will-the-neighbors-think) and asked, “How many times must I forgive. Seven?!” He may have wanted to avoid the fear of looking foolish by forgiving too many times. Jesus said, “No; it’s 77 times.”

The fear that God overcame with Moses had the repeating phrase of, words to the effect of, *I will be with you*. Moses’ fear of public speaking; God’s response, I will be with you. Moses’ fear of water; I will be with you and you have an assembled team of people to help you through it. Peter’s fear – how can I forgive once, much less seven times, or even 77 times – was met with Jesus’ response, *I will be with you*. And, when you forgive, I’ll be there and so will your support network. The way I hear it is this: we need help to forgive; God will provide that help and we also need support; God will provide that too.

When we are infants, we have two fears: noises and not being supported. Later on, we develop a fear I have not mentioned – death. The Letter to the Romans deals with that fear in a particular way. But first, there is another fear it deals with: the fear of being punished from God. Some don’t eat particular foods because they are worried about being punished by God. Some keep a particular day holy out of fear of punishment from God. Paul is writing to them that God is interested in our service to others; in our love of God and of one another; therefore, let people eat as they will and hold particular days as holy as they will because we are all called to serve the Lord. And, then to the fear of death, we have the words that have been included in our funeral rite: *We don’t live for ourselves and we don’t die for ourselves. If we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we belong to God.*

God calmed Moses’ fears with the assurance that God will be with him. Here we have Paul writing with the same assurance – if we live, if we die, we belong to God. He then adds for emphasis this line: *This is why Christ died and lived: so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.*

For we ourselves, who have adult fears, we remember our fears of our childhood: fears about creatures that go bump in the night, but we now have figured out the real fears – looking like a fool, what will the neighbors think, and, of course, the fear of death. In response, we have this assurance: Christ died and lived so that he is the Lord of both the dead and the living. So whether we live or die we are the Lord’s possession.

In faith, we can grow; like how Elijah is no longer afraid to be home alone; we too in faith can grow into the assurance that God, the Great I AM, is always with us; to not be afraid, to remember our support network, and to remember that God is always with us.