Luke 8:26–39 *Jesus casts out a man’s demons and they enter a herd of swine.*

I read somewhere that the phrase “Do not be afraid” appears in the bible more than 350 times. In today’s bible stories, we explore fear in the Bible in a slightly different way. Before we get there though…if I walk into a room and I see a spider, I will calmly walk out of the room so I can take time to consider my options.

Do, I walk back into the room, have a conversation with the spider because I know how much good they do around my house? I know that by living in my walls they get rid of other bugs and have been proven to reduce the number of termites. They don’t do bad work around the house, I understand that. So I simply need to take the opportunity to explain to the spider that since it doesn’t pay rent, it needs to stay in the walls out of my sight. That seems like a reasonable option.

Option number 2 is that I go back into the room with about 5 million paper towels and a shoe and simply take care of business. Not very humane if you think about it, but it does solve the problem I am having.

Option number 3 is that after leaving the room, I call to Candice to come to the room and “take care of it”. I don’t want to know what she does after that moment; I just want to know when it is finished.

Option number 4 is that after leaving the room, I gather the things required to set the house on fire as that is obviously the only way to deal with the situation.

Wait, I forgot to mention what my first reaction generally is. I usually freak out just a little bit, potentially scream like I am an 8-year-old girl at my first horror movie and then proceed to option number 3. Candice takes care of the spiders in our house, but I think I am getting better. At least option number one flirts in my head now instead of instantly jumping to burning the building down.

I joke, but I also want to make sure that we understand that fear can be a good thing. Fear keeps us out of dangerous situations. Fear has allowed people to survive for as long as people have been around. We fear snakes because we have experience with them being venomous, we fear animals that are bigger and stronger and faster than us, especially if we have no way to defend ourselves.

I bring this up because everyone has fears, everyone has phobias. Our brain is the thing that causes us to be afraid. The amygdala is a small set of neurons in the middle of our brain that controls how we react to fear and tells us when to be afraid. Do we fight or do we flee? Research indicates that the amygdala does more than just recognize fear, it controls our emotional responses to everything. Fear, pain, happiness, surprise, love, hate, everything is first registered in this one very small part of the brain. What we do with our fears is what becomes important to our safety, to our survival, to how we live our lives and how we react to others. I was reading an article on CNN that referenced a 1960’s study that concluded that there are only two innate fears. The fear of falling and the fear of loud sounds. Two fears that are there to obviously protect you and help you live a long life. Avoid falling off of things and avoid getting surprised. Everything else we fear is learned by observation and experience.

Before I jump into the heart of the message for today, I want to take a moment to tell you what this message will not be about. Some of what I am going to talk about is going to seem very uplifting and may even border on telling you to overcome all fears. Some fear is good. As I mentioned, fear can keep you out of dangerous situations and keep you safe. As we proceed this morning, I do however want you to think about if you are scared of the right things. Are you trying to overcome your fears? How are you trying to overcome your fears?

I always feel like I am trying to cover too much ground when I give the message and in attempt to not do that this morning, I am going to focus on the Gospel reading, but if you want to read more about fear, our reading from 1st Kings this morning had a usually very strong figure fearing for his life standing on a mountain by himself. He was afraid that the movement would die without him, he was afraid for his life as others were trying to chase him down and kill him. He had a right to be afraid, but God told him multiple times to get back into the game. This passage also talks a little bit about seeking out God and finding him in the quiet. That is a different sermon for a different day however.

Today I want to focus on our Gospel reading as the fear comes from many different places. The man named legion is scared, the demons that possess him are scared, the townsfolks end up being scared…and of what are all of them scared? Jesus, of course. That sounds odd to those of us sitting in this room this morning doesn’t it? Who could be scared of Jesus? He was born to die for our sins, what is there to be scared of? In order to explain that, let me recap the story in my own words.

Jesus has had a long journey across stormy seas but had come for one purpose. To spread his message and save people. He steps foot out on to the land and the first thing that happens is that a crazed man comes running up to him and starts yelling at him. Jesus knew what he was doing, he simply asked the guy what his name was. The guy answered in a strange way. He said “legion” because he had so many demons in him. These demons were powerful enough that they would cause this guy to break free from chains and run into the forest. Everyone knew this guy, they knew who he was, they knew his place, even he knew his place. He was the crazy guy.

Jesus showed no signs of fear, but the demons in this guy were afraid. They pleaded with him and asked if they could go into the body of the pigs instead of just being cast out. Even the demons were scared of the power of Jesus. The crazy guy was scared of what Jesus was going to do as well. He didn’t know anything other than being the crazy guy. Jesus relented and told the demons that they had to leave the man, but they could go into the bodies of the pigs. We won’t talk today about how much really good bacon went to waste during this incident, but these demons went into the pigs and the pigs promptly ran to the lake and drowned themselves. The Jews didn’t like pigs anyway and this story really showed that contempt. The demons would rather suffer in the pigs that be cast out to perish though.

Some from the village had seen what had happened and they ran into the village to tell everyone. As people sometimes do they flocked to the site of this event because they absolutely had to gawk. When they got there, they saw their livelihood drowned in the lake and the crazy man from the woods having a pleasant, not so crazy conversation with Jesus. They were scared. They were not amazed and in my opinion, probably not scared for the same reason you probably think they were scared. Sure, miracles can be scary, but why would they be scared for this guy getting in good and having the demons cast out from him? I believe that the townspeople were probably more scared of the fact that this guy from across the sea came and upset the social order of things. Everyone kind of knew their place. The rich knew they were rich and were able to look down on the crazy guy. The crazy guy knew he was crazy and would look with envy upon everyone else. Jesus came in and in a couple of short minutes changed up the social order.

At that point, the townsfolks did the only reasonable thing that they could think to do. They sent Jesus away. The formerly crazy guy wanted to go to, but Jesus wanted him to stick around and spread the word. This verse doesn’t talk about it, but that must have caused a great deal of fear for all around as well.

Jesus never said that fear was a bad thing, Jesus never indicated that there wasn’t place for fear. Remember, he was afraid as well at times during his life. No, he didn’t say don’t be afraid in this instance even though that phrase is used more than 350 times throughout the bible. He said, rise above it. In other words, don’t set the house on fire just because there was a spider in the kitchen. Rise above it, find the value and spread the word.

My message today in not on the virtues of spiders in your house, my message is more about how you let fear affect you. I always try and bring in some sort of movie quote to my messages because I think it helps people connect and I am going to share a quote from one of the all-time great movie series. Star Wars. Before I get there though, let’s talk a little bit about what fear causes us to do in today’s world. Fear makes us boycott businesses because of where people want to use the restroom. Fear makes us want to build walls. Fear makes us chastise people that are not like us. Fear makes people turn away from an otherwise friendly church. Fear makes us do things because they have always been done that way. Fear makes us jump to conclusions about people. Fear makes people go into a crowded club with assault weapons and start shooting. In other words, fear makes us do bad things.

Now, with all of that said, Yoda in Star Wars is talking to Luke and says “Fear is the path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger, Anger leads to hate, hate leads to suffering.”

When we fear and we give in to that fear, who loses? Ultimately who gets hurt when we push people away because of our fear? Jesus teaches us to push the social limits, open up to new possibilities. People were afraid of what Jesus did, but he encouraged them to lean into that fear, figure out what was causing that fear and push forward with the word. They pushed him away in this story. I cannot tell you the number of times I have seen people push others away in the name of fear or anger or hate or suffering. At what cost?

As I mentioned earlier, fear is experiential. Everything we have done, every experience we have had leads us to where we are right now. Nobody really wants to change you. They may want to see you improve and that is what Jesus really wants from us throughout the Gospels. He wants us to be better than our base fears, he wants us to preach the good news without judgement.

As I wrap up today, I want to share the text that I saw on-line while preparing the sermon today that I thought fits well and gives everyone a call to action.

Every event that has taken place in this universe has led you to this moment. Every star exploding, every planet colliding, every molecule combining, every quantum occurrence, every life that arose, every adaptation, every evolution of every species, every birth, every death, every thought, every realization and every action taken by anyone who has ever lived and every fear that you have all lead to the real question…what will you do with this moment? Will you let your fear lead to hate and suffering, or will you lean into your fear and move forward with the grace of God and Jesus Christ?

Amen