

# The Greatest Thing to Fear

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



*Exodus 16:1-8; Matthew 6:25-34*

Whether it is located inside our smartphones or inside the dashboard of our cars many of us carry with us when we are driving a disembodied voice that is telling us where to go. We type in our destination and some satellite somewhere beams down to us the route we are to take. We set aside our AAA roadmaps – and even sometimes our common sense – even sometimes our own sense of direction – and we listen to the disembodied satellite voice tell us where we are to go. At least, I hope, until the disembodied voice tells us to cross a bridge that is not there, or turn down the wrong way of a one way street, or continue upon a detoured road. And how many times has it happened when we have chosen to ignore the disembodied voice and drive what seems the most practical route – and the voice speaks to us and says, “At the next available opportunity, please turn around.” Some of us have selected a calm disembodied voice to admonish us -- “At the next available opportunity, please turn around.” Others have a drill sergeant. I kind of like the drill sergeant. But the problem is you can go for a pretty long time with a rather stubborn GPS that will not give up on telling you that you are going the wrong way and that you need to go back. You need to go back! Recalculating ... you need to go back. Recalculating ... you need to go back!!

Now the easy analogy that you’ve heard I’m sure in a ton of sermons and blogs and podcasts – is that in the spiritual world there is this thing called repentance – which means “stop, turn around” and that every one of carries this divine voice who is telling us of the times when we are heading down the wrong path and that we must recalculate and at the next available opportunity we must turn around and go back. Sound advice in so many different parts of our lives. Repentance is a big deal for each of us.

That’s the easy analogy. It’s not the easy thing to do – but it is the easy GPS analogy. God says turn around, so

I should turn around.

But sometimes it’s not God who is telling you to turn around.

You see it’s important to understand that the divine GPS voice of repentance is not the only voice that is talking in our heads. Even if you are mentally healthy the truth is you have lots of voices speaking to you – the voice of conscience, the voice of ego, the voice of God, the voice of insecurity, the voice of the pizza you ate last night, whatever – and it can be difficult sometimes to discern which of these voices is speaking and which of them should I be listening to!

Because one of these voices that often speak to us is the voice of fear. And the voice of fear is almost always the voice from the future. The voice of fear is the voice that speaks out of the uncertainty of the future. What is going to happen???? And so it is the voice of fear is the voice that often will tell us to turn around. To go back. To return to the way things used to be. Not to “go back and find a new road” – but to just go back because back there feels more comfortable.

I am a nostalgic person. I love to look back. I love old scrapbooks. I love old family stories. I love old sports players. I loved it when Michigan used to beat Michigan State. I love the old music. My radio dial is set to the Classic Rock station – music from the 60’s, 70’s and 80’s. That’s when they played real rock n roll I say to myself. I love to look back. But when I look back I know that I am doing so with these distorted lenses. When I look back on my life I often have these rose-colored glasses on and I see things not as they were ... but as I want to remember. Life wasn’t necessarily any easier back then, and I was not necessarily any happier – but I look back and paint sunny skies and cool breezes.

And so there can be this temptation to want to go back. Stop time, rewind the clock to when life was better. And in turn resist the future. Resist the future because I don’t know what it holds – and I don’t know if I will have what it takes. Resist the future because I don’t know what it holds – and I don’t know if I will have what it takes. Which is the issue it seems in our story this morning from Exodus.

So from last week until now we have read that Moses accepted the call from God to go to Egypt and free

his people. He has gone toe to toe with Pharaoh and Pharaoh has let his people go. And they have crossed the Sea and now they are in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. On their way to the future. On their way to promised freedom! Leaving behind slavery. Leaving behind forced labor. Leaving behind cruel conditions – they are on their way to a new life. But they don’t particularly know what that life is going to be. And they don’t particularly know if they will have what it takes. So when their first test comes, when they first wonder if they are going to have what it takes – namely food – all of a sudden there comes this voice from the future, the voice of fear, that says, “Go back. Recalculate, go back. Slavery wasn’t so bad. Forced labor wasn’t so bad. Cruel working conditions weren’t so bad. At least we had a little gruel for our tummies. Remember the good old days of gruel???” they say. And that’s the crazy thing about the voice of fear – it can turn gruel into a T-bone steak. “Gruel! Oh man, I used to love gruel!”

But you know if there is anything we learn from the Bible it is that God doesn’t go back. God doesn’t go back. God is always moving ahead. And not only does God move ahead, but God is always making a way for us to move ahead too.

When the Israelites get to the Sea – God parts the water. When the bread runs out, God showers manna from heaven. When the meat runs out, quail drop from the sky. When the water runs out, H<sub>2</sub>O streams forth from a rock. God is always moving ahead and God is always making a way for us to move ahead too.

Unless of course the voice of fear is the voice we listen to. The tragedy of Israel’s story is when they kept moving ahead, they made incredible progress to the land of freedom. But when they got to the edge of the promised land and looked over and sent spies and heard reports that giants lived in the land – forget the manna, forget

the quail, forget the water -- they let the voice of the uncertain future take center stage – and they listened and they said, Best we go back. Best we retreat. Better wandering the past than embracing the future. And so they turned back – and they wandered. And they wandered. And they wandered for the next 38 years in the past. God’s in the promised land of the future, but they are in the wilderness of the past.

The greatest thing to fear is the temptation to go back.

I finished recently Candice Millard’s recent history of Winston Churchill’s early life when he was involved in the Boer War in what is now known as South Africa. The 24-year-old Churchill found himself in the middle of the war on a train that was attacked by the Boers that resulted in him and all his comrades being captured and marched off to a prisoner of war camp. From the moment of his arrival at the POW camp – all that Churchill could think of was escaping. He was not going to ride out the war as a POW. So along with two friends they devised an escape plan. But when the time came for the escape only Winston was in the right place at the right time (the moment when the guards weren’t looking) and he took the chance, scaled the fence, dropped to other side. And in the moment on the other side from captivity, the side of freedom, he realized that as much as he wanted to be free, being free was dangerous. It was safer to be in bondage. But then came a second thought – the only thing more dangerous than being free, was climbing back over the fence! He realized there was no going back. I’ll let you read the rest of the story.

The greatest thing to fear is the temptation to go back. Because you see God is always moving ahead. He’s going to get those people to the Promised Land whatever it takes. Manna, quail, water, Moses, Joshua, even Rahab the prostitute helps them advance into Jericho. God is always making a way for us to move ahead.

“The greatest thing to fear is the temptation to go back.”

It's why we love that great story in the Old Testament when the Israelites reach a dead end with the Philistines and they don't think they can go any further – because the Philistines have this big giant named Goliath. And there ain't nobody that can take on the giant Goliath. Unless it's a little shepherd boy – who so happens to be pretty good with a sling shot – and there just so happens to be five smooth stones – and he just so happens to need just one of them – and before anyone knows it the giant is lying on the ground and God is moving forward.

The greatest thing to fear is the temptation to go back.

And so when Jesus comes on the scene and says let's move ahead. Let's move ahead with a new spirit of the law that says that love is the ace card in the whole deck. Love is the beginning and the end of the law. It's not about the statutes and the ordinances – it's about making sure that your neighbor, your fellow human being gets loved.

And so it's the religious bosses who say, "Oh no, we're not going there! There's giants in that land. There's uncertainty in that land. There's not the comfort of all the rules in that land." But Jesus says, "God is moving ahead. And frankly, perfect love casts out fear. God will make a way. God will rain manna. God will provide. Because you see love is always moving forward. And it's risky and it's unknown and it's uncertain. And we may not always get it right. But God is always dragging us into the future because the future is where the living are and the living need to be loved.

Do not be anxious for tomorrow, Jesus says, for tomorrow will have its own problems. And by the way, the one who clothes the lilies of the field - don't you think he's paying attention to you?

Remember when Jesus passed by the young man who said he wanted to follow him, but he needed first to bury his father? And Jesus says, "Leave the dead to bury the dead." And I say, well that's not very nice. But you see God has this heart for the living and the living are always ahead of us.

And that's really what the Church is about, right? The Church since its very beginning is always been about moving ahead. From the day of Pentecost when a new Spirit blew through the apostles the Church has been on the advance. Helmut Thielicke said that the gospel is

always being forwarded to a new address. We rejoice in our past, but we never go back to it right? We sing the old hymns, of course. We recite the ancient creeds – but we move ahead into the uncertainty of the future because we know that God has got some loving for us to do with whoever comes our way.

We're baptizing two babies today. And every baby drags us into the unknown future and a changing world. When my daddy baptized my daughter almost thirty years ago there were no such things as iPhones and Facebooks and terrorists flying planes into buildings and madmen spraying concerts with bullets, opioid crisis, Amazon.com, Hurricane Harvey, Irma, Maria and Nate – none were a blip on my radar. But the church said to her and says to all her children – we will follow you into the future and we will love you every step of the way.

We are in our 61st year here at Church of the Palms – and we gather together and we give thanks for the 60 – but quickly we turn right? And the world is a very different place than it was 60 years ago – the challenges are different – the culture less accommodating to a church like ours. But we move ahead. We build Palm Centers and we engage youth and we hand out groceries and we tutor children and we care for infants and we forward the gospel to a new address. Because perfect love casts out fear. We don't worry that we may not have enough – because it is the God of manna that drags us forward. And God says, Don't hold onto that manna in your pockets, don't be saving for a rainy day because you got this great church to support – and the longer you hold onto your money the more your kids will fight over it. Don't sit there waiting for things to go back to the way they used to be – because they never will and they never should. You're over the fence now. No going back. God is on his way to the Promised Land. God has always got a new person for us to love.

You've heard me mention Terry Fox before. Young Canadian teenager, great athlete. Wakes up one morning to find he has bone cancer. Wakes up another morning to find that they have to amputate his leg above the knee. Talk about wanting to live in the past. But not more than a year later with a prosthesis attached to his thigh – Terry Fox says he's moving ahead. God's moving ahead and he's moving ahead too. He's going to run across Canada and raise money for children with cancer.

Oh Terry ... but you don't have what it takes. You don't have the body. You don't have the stamina. Best you live in the past. Or at least accept your present. No, Terry was moving ahead and started his run ... his run for the children. And all of Canada ran with him. They sent money. They emptied their pockets because this young man was taking them into the future. And at the end of his 3000+ mile run when his cancer returned and eventually took his life – Terry raised \$22,000,000 for cancer research. That's a lot of love.

I'm not sure who it was that said, "A familiar captivity is often more desirable than an unfamiliar freedom." Oh, ain't that the truth. But what's even more true? God is on the move and he is dragging us with him. Scary, yes. Dangerous, yes. Uncertain, yes. But the greater fear should always be going back. Love is ahead of us, not behind us. And perfect love, my friends, casts out the fear.



# The Greatest Thing to Fear

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Church of the Palms

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