

Calming the Cauldron of Fear
Sunday, October 26, 2008
The Rev. Barbara E. Davis
1 Samuel 28:3-14
Mark 4:35-41

It may raise some Christian eyebrows when I share that Halloween is one of my favorite holidays. For me, there has always been something exciting about Halloween's spooky and unexpected qualities. It is probably no surprise that Halloween is the second largest commercial holiday in the United States, trumped only by Christmas. Halloween's pagan roots in an ancient Celtic festival have drawn furrowed religious concern in recent years, citing the holiday's connection with death and evil spirits as a way in which people can be lured into witchcraft. "Harvest festival" alternatives and "Fright Houses" that show the horrors of perceived immoralities have emerged in some communities as an expression of this fear of Halloween.¹

I never experienced any concern about Halloween's connection with evil in the small town in western Pennsylvania where I grew up. My concern was more with where I would go trick-or-treating since we lived in the country with only about three neighboring houses. We always made do somehow, occasionally getting in the car to trick-or-treat in more populated areas. More than once on Halloween, I dressed up as a ghost, since it was the easiest costume that still allowed for me to run and jump freely. While we liked the spooky part of Halloween, my family was more in touch with the aspects of the holiday that marked the transition from fall to winter. The garden would be cleaned and prepared for its rest, leaves were raked into huge piles, wood was loaded into our basement for the cold days and nights ahead. Halloween was an important transition in the cycle of the year.

In my ghost costume I would race around our yard, jumping and running, full of the power of disguise. It was during one such Halloween dash that I ran straight into the branches of a medium sized pine tree in our yard and flopped to the ground in shock. It took me a minute to get my bearings, my confidence and pride suffered the only injuries, but I remember getting up from the ground with caution, sure that I had been attacked by the one creature that struck fear into my heart in those days – the white-tailed deer.

Now, even in Pennsylvania, where white-tailed deer claim their fame as the state animal and where many years the state struggles with their over-population, deer are not known to be particularly aggressive. Where I got this idea that a deer would attack me, one can only guess – an older brother perhaps? -- but it stuck in my head for many years, and made me cautious when I was near the edge of our woods, especially at night.

That Halloween night when I pulled myself up from the ground having been bested by a pine tree, I had to wrestle with the reality that my fear of deer was misplaced in that moment. I would have fared much better being afraid of running into something since I couldn't see through the eyeholes in my ghost costume.

We are in an interesting time of transition in our nation and in our world. Election day lies just ahead, the countdown of days easy to find on whatever news program you watch. The economy of our country, and of the world, seems to be on its own blind-folded roller coaster ride, where the twists and turns and ups and downs are not easy to see until they are upon us. Concerns are mounting up, job loss, childcare, health issues, loss of loved ones, school costs, there is no end to the worries and things about which we fear. How then are we to manage our

fears? How do we rightly identify the pine trees from the deer? From where do we draw strength and confidence?

Today we heard two biblical stories about facing fear during changes in leadership. One was a good old-fashioned witch story, set in a complicated leadership transition in ancient Israel. The other was a moment of discipleship, set in a tempest at sea. Let's look closely at these two passages to identify some ways our faith might call us to transform our fears.

You may not be as familiar with the story that Jon, Sarah and I read from 1 Samuel 28, but it presents an important episode in the leadership transition between Saul and David. The passage begins with the death of Samuel, the man who was the leader of the Israelites before Saul. Samuel, despite his misgivings, helped the Israelites to be like other nations and appoint their first king. After Saul became king, Samuel became his spiritual advisor and filled an important role as the medium between God and king. Samuel was part of the fabric of the lives of the Israelites for many years and his death was no small event. You probably remember Samuel as a boy; he was the one who heard God's voice while he was asleep in the Temple and thought it was his teacher, Eli who was calling to him, until he and Eli realized it was God's voice speaking to Samuel. The impact of Samuel's death ripples through the community and here in 1 Samuel it is strangely coupled with the expulsion of the mediums and wizards by Saul. The fact that these two events are reported together signifies a separation; the dialogue between the spiritual and the political has been severed on all fronts.

It must have been a very tumultuous time for the Israelites, who we are told are all gathered at Gilboa with Saul. Saul is uneasy and afraid, and he is cut off from any reliable source of inspiration. Samuel had been his intercessor with God in the past, but now Samuel is dead, and God is not answering Saul, so he turns to the one place where he thinks he may get help. Challenging his earlier decision to expel the mediums and wizards, he seeks a medium out in the hopes of communicating with Samuel. If you thought there weren't any good Halloween stories in the Bible, here we have one that is fit for our imaginations! Saul disguises himself and in the dark of night seeks this woman in Endor. The servants' familiarity with her whereabouts suggests that perhaps the mediums and wizards had disappeared to the authorities but not to the people.

This woman of Endor is not foolish; for although she does not recognize him as Saul in his disguise, she is cautious and wants to be sure that the risk is not too great. Interestingly, his assurance to her is a vow in the name of the Lord, creating havoc, I think, for modern theorists who suggest Saul's dismissal of mediums and wizards is proof in current times of why we shouldn't read Harry Potter or anything having to do with sorcery or witchcraft. Saul's vow to the Lord puts her mind at ease; it is not until he asks her to call up Samuel that she realizes the tempest that she has just entered. In her fear and anger, she pieces together quickly that this is Saul in her house, the very one who she fears because of his decree banishing mediums and wizards. He is too impatient to worry about these details of contradiction, so he assures her and tells her not to be afraid, and urges her for more information about Samuel.

The two main characters in this passage are reacting and responding to their fears. Saul is fearful because there is a huge army about to attack and he has lost the confidence of God. The woman from Endor is fearful for her life because what is being asked of her is risky politically; and she is afraid of Samuel as well, who even in death cast a long shadow as the one who had the ear of God.

In Samuel's conversation with Saul that follows what we heard this morning, Saul's worst fears are confirmed. He is told that the battle will be lost and his life with it. The woman's

fears transform into compassion as she realizes Saul is no threat to her, and she is able to finally convince Saul to eat so that he will have strength for what is ahead. At the end of their interaction, both have come to a different understanding of their fear. Rather than feeding each other's fear, they are able to distinguish their fears and their interaction helps each to understand their fear differently.

The story from Mark's Gospel that Suzanne read for us, gives us another perspective on fear. One evening, the disciples and Jesus get into a boat to go across to the other side. Suddenly a windstorm arose and the water was rushing into the boat. Jesus was asleep, and the disciples wake him urgently, their hearts in their throats, despite their experience as fisherman, they are afraid of this storm. Their waking Jesus is not unreasonable, but their question about if he is uncaring of their situation seems to be fear talking more than common sense.

Jesus in this moment takes on the mantle of divine authority. He does not waver or question the timing or hesitate, he stands up and commands the wind and the sea: "Peace, be still!" and there was dead calm. Jesus was not afraid of the storm and he even seems irritated with the disciples for being scared when he asks, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" If he remains calm, cool, and collected through the whole passage, the disciples remain afraid, albeit about different things, through the whole passage.

The disciples fear begins as a sheer primal desire for survival in the face of a frightening storm and transforms into a healthy fear of Jesus who has exhibited exceptional qualities already, but controlling the winds and sea have now put him on a divine pedestal. The disciples manage their fear of the storm by turning to Jesus for help, although their fear does cause them to urge for his help angrily. Their frustration with his sleeping through the storm invades their sense of security at having him nearby. They feel Jesus should have been aware of their fear without them having to ask him for help.

Fear is a funny thing, it backs us into the corner quickly and it is not always easy to see where fear is coming from or what is really causing it. Fear saps our strength and confidence and makes us more than cautious. Fear slows us to a halt and pulls our fists into fighting position. Fear confuses and paralyzes us. All of us feel fear, Saul felt fear, the woman from Endor felt fear, the disciples felt fear. The dangerous part of fear is that it builds on itself quickly. It is easy to find our cauldrons of fear at a rolling boil without us even knowing the fire got turned up. We inadvertently add to our cauldron of fears and find ourselves gazing over the lip of the pot, listening as fear itself whispers to us like one of the witches in Macbeth, "Double, double, toil and trouble; fire burn and cauldron bubble." When our cauldrons are full of fear, and more fear gets added everyday, how do we say instead to that bubbling stew, "Peace, be still!"?

We long for our fears to evaporate completely, and at first we envy the disciples and their good fortune to be with a leader who commands not only the waters and the sea but rebukes fear as well. But imagining a world where fear is not among our emotions is too steep an expectation of our faith. We are going to have fears, the question is not so much how to get rid of our cauldron of fears, but how our faith can help transform our fears. The disciples are not without fear, even after Jesus calms the storm, their fear of the storm subsides, but they are even more uncertain of what to make of Jesus. Saul is not without fear after he speaks to Samuel through the woman at Endor, he is in fact so fearful he falls to the ground faint. But in hearing the truth of his worst fears confirmed, he finds the strength to go and let his fate unfold.

We learn the most about transforming our fear from the woman of Endor. She is afraid of Saul and his threat on her life for her skills as a medium. She transforms that fear into the strength of compassion. She is disenfranchised by Saul, but when she meets him, he is the most

alienated individual in all the community; her fear could have easily allowed her to treat him more harshly and not suffer any consequences. But instead of allowing his fear to feed her own, she encouraged him to eat, so he would have strength when he went on his way. She finds a way to realize that her fear at his deception need not boil over. Her fear does not blind her, when she hits that wall of fear, she recognizes her fears for what they are and she does not muddle her fears with Saul's fears.

Our faith offers us community and recognition of ourselves in our humanity. Our faith does not teach us how to be without fear. Our very humanness means that there will be moments when we are afraid. Our humanness also means that there will be moments of transformation when we breathe in the rich smells of strength and confidence. When the woman of Endor saw Samuel wrapped in his robe coming up from the ground, it was that catalyst that put her fear in perspective. Like the woman of Endor, most of us have that one ingredient that transforms our boiling cauldron of fear into a pot of strength and confidence.

Your ingredient probably isn't a vision, although it could be. Your ingredient could be that moment when you check on your child at night to make sure the blanket is still on and take an extra moment to look at their sleeping face. Your ingredient might be the brush of hand from a loved one in a public place. Your ingredient could be a photo or memory of one who is no longer living, but in that image, something still stirs. Your ingredient might be a bible verse or a poem. We seek out those ingredients that will calm our cauldron of fear, and when we find them we stir them into our cauldron and whisper with authority and hope: "Peace, be still."

¹ Lytch, Steve. "Trick or Treat: What's Halloween About?" www.TheThoughtfulChristian.com 2008.