

Whistling in the Wilderness

Joseph S. Harvard, III

First Presbyterian Church, Durham, North Carolina

There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.

I John 4:18a

Almost without being aware of the change, many people have permitted fear to transform the sunshine of love and peace into a sunset of inner depression. . . . We must constantly build dykes of courage to hold back the flood of fear.

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Lent begins in the wilderness. The story says that the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness where the devil awaited him. None of us goes voluntarily into the wild, unsettled areas of life. It is a fearful thing to be in a place where we are not in control. So it is with some trepidation that we enter this season of the church year which brings us face to face with fear. We like to think of ourselves as "fearless." It is difficult to be honest about our fears.

A recent television ad taps into this common human trait. The lights go out in the dining car of the train while John Madden is extolling the virtues of Lite Beer. The panic which follows reveals his fear of the dark. This big man with a build similar to "the Refrigerator" makes a confession "live and in color" for all to see. Not only is this successful former NFL football coach afraid of flying, he is afraid of the dark. To make matters worse, he suggests that we are all afraid of something.

In the wilderness, we come face-to-face with some truths about ourselves. Maybe the best way to begin the journey is by joining John Madden in admitting our fear. "O.K., we are afraid." We live in a terror-filled world where human existence is precious. It is not just the threat of nuclear annihilation or terrorism. As we grow older our eyes are more quickly drawn to the obituaries. Our condition as human lends itself to being afraid.

The plot thickens as we enter the wilderness of Lent. If the experience of Jesus provides us with any clues, we shall face temptation, conflict with those in power, being misunderstood by those closest to us, praying in Gethsemane to have the cup removed from us, betrayal, and finally the old rugged cross—"an emblem of suffering and shame." This Lenten journey is not a stroll down paradise lane. We are entering the combat zone of the human spirit where fear and trembling are appropriate.

The first lesson of Lent is to admit our fear. As our anxiety level rises, there is a tendency to deny it. "Why should I be afraid? I live in the safest, strongest society on earth." The current mood in our country is to deny those realities which do not suit us. Denial leads to suppression. Fears which are suppressed often emerge in more destructive forms.

Robert Frost once said: "Nothing scares me like scared people." Two pictures illustrate how fear can misshape us when it is the dominant motif. In addressing the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship Breakfast at the General Assembly in Indianapolis in June, 1985, Henri Nouwen tells this parable to indicate where fear can lead us:

Once there was a people that surveyed the resources of the world, and they said to each other, "How can we be sure that we will have enough in hard times? We want to survive whatever happens. Let us start collecting food, materials, and knowledge so that we are safe and secure when a crisis occurs." So they started hoarding and hoarding, so much that other people protested and said, "Hey, you have much more than you need, while we don't have enough to survive. Give us part of your wealth."

But the fearful hoarders said, "No, no, no, no, we need to keep this in case of emergencies, in case things go bad for us too, in case our lives are threatened." But the others said, "We are dying now. Please give us food and materials and knowledge to survive. We can't wait—we need it now."

And then the fearful hoarders became even more fearful, since they became afraid that the poor and hungry would attack them. So they said to one another, "Let us build walls around our wealth so that no stranger can take it away from us." And as their fear increased they told each other, "Our enemies have become so numerous that they may be able to tear down our walls. Our walls are not strong enough to keep them away. We need to put bombs on top of the walls so that nobody would dare to even come close to us." But instead of feeling safe and secure behind their armed walls, they found themselves trapped in the prison they had built with their own fear. They even became afraid of their own bombs, wondering if they might harm themselves more than their enemy. And gradually they realized that their fear for death had brought them closer to it.

Another way anxiety finds expression is in the treatment of prisoners. Those who have been convicted of crimes against society are housed in overflowing prisons. Protection from those who would harm us is important, but the concern for rehabilitation is lacking in crowded human warehouses. We have more people in prison for longer sentences than any country in the world with the exception of South Africa and the Soviet Union. Do we have more bad people? Are we more cruel in our attitudes towards offenders?

Joanna Adams, Community minister of Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta offers an explanation through the following incident: "A couple of weeks ago I stopped at a pharmacy on Peachtree Street, and while I waited to pay for my purchase, I was engaged in conversation by a lady whose prescription was being filled. 'What do you think of this new jail they want the taxpayers to pay for?' she asked me. Before I could answer, the face of this heretofore pleasant woman became dark and rigid with anger as she hissed grimly from behind clenched teeth, 'I know how we can save ourselves the cost of a jail. We

can throw every one of those savages into the Chattahoochee River and pray they drown.' With that, she snatched up her sack and stormed out in a rage."

In reflecting on this incident, Ms. Adams says: "Perhaps something awful had happened to her long ago, but now she was drowning in her hate and fear. . . . The fear that makes us call these people savages, if we are not careful, can turn us into savages as well." As the woman's rage illustrates, fear can lead to less than human behavior. Anxiety has changed legitimate concern for protection into a system which even most officials who run it admit is a failure.

"To be afraid is the basis of all things," suggested William Faulkner. The first lesson is to admit our fear and not let it control us. If fear is not going to change us into the evil we deplore, we must find some resource in the wilderness to assist us. Dealing with those who threaten us whether they be criminal offenders or political adversaries requires a power capable of reaching our deepest anxiety.

How do we deal with fear? "Love overcomes fear." Now, if that doesn't sound like something you would read in a *Journal for Preachers*. Pious nonsense! Try love out while walking down a dark inner city street after midnight. When you go to negotiate arms agreements, arm yourself with love, or take it into a divorce court. It is like whistling in the dark.

The Bible teaches us that there is an alternative to living in fear. We are offered a resource in the wilderness. Listen to these words from the prophet Isaiah, to those in exile: "Say to those of a fearful heart, take courage, fear not. Your God will come and save you" (Isaiah 35:4). The annunciation of God's appearance carries with it this word to Mary: "Do not be afraid" (Luke 1:30). The birth announcement begins: "Be not afraid; for behold I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people" (Luke 2:10). This is the same word which greets those who first learn that Jesus is risen: "Be not afraid" (Matthew 28:5). The message is clear that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ addresses our deep anxiety.

"Why are you afraid?" This is the question Jesus asked his disciples when they were on a boat in a storm. It is his question to us. "Do you not care if we perish?" (Mark 4:38). This was their fear shouting back. Jesus understands our anxiety about our safety. He looks behind our fears to their source. Jesus believes there is a reality with the power to overcome fear. It is the same belief which the writer of I John offered when he wrote that love has the power to overcome fear. In this dark and dangerous world, we are in the company of a God who is love.

In Olive Ann Burns' novel, *Cold Sassy Tree*, the main character is a wise old grandpa, E. Rucker Blakeslee, who struggles in 1906 to make some sense out of Jesus' words: "Ask and it shall be given you." His insight near the end of a life full of pain is instructive:

When Jesus said ast and ye shall receive, I don't think He meant us to pray "Lord, spare my child," or "Make it rain for the crops," or "Don't let my bizness fail." I don't even think Jesus meant us to ast for a house or a piano. When Jesus said ast and you'll git it, He was givin' a gar'ntee—a spiritual healing', not body healin'. He was sayin' that if'n you git beat down—scairt to death you cain't do what you got to, or scairt

you go'n die, or scairt folks won't like you—why, all you got to do is put yore hand in God's and He'll lift you up. I know it for a fact. I can pray, "Lord, help me not be scairt," and I don't know how, but it's like a eraser wipes the fears away.

Is it like whistling in the dark? Have you ever noticed how some people whistle when they are anxious? It relieves tension. But it also creates a tune which may encourage someone to join in and that creates a feeling of companionship. Isn't that what we search for in calming our fears? A sense of community which overcomes our anxiety. The Christian reality expressed in Jesus Christ affirms that God, who is love, dwells with us. God has taken up residence in our neighborhood and calls on us to join in creating community.

Such love may just be what is able to touch our fear. At least this was the experience of the Psalmist who wrote: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil for Thou art with me." A community which affirms faith in the presence of such a God has the power to overcome fear even when existence is so precarious.

Let me share an experience which confirmed this reality for me. In the summer of 1985 I visited the Soviet Union with eighty other church people from across the United States as guests of the Russian Orthodox Church. As we landed at the Moscow International Airport I felt a strong surge of anxiety in the pit of my stomach. In other words, I was scared. All those years of hearing about the evil Russians had not been lost on me.

After being carefully scrutinized by a Soviet soldier and allowed entrance into the country, I was still apprehensive. Then we began the experience of attending worship services and being welcomed by the babushkas (grandmothers) who are so present in the Russian Church. They would hug me often with tears streaming down their cheeks on faces reflecting a deep faith in God. There were also the children and other adults who greeted us with hope. For two weeks I went through this ritual in Orthodox, Lutheran, Catholic and Baptist Churches. Under this steady barrage of love, I found that my fears had subsided and I was beginning to feel at home in this alien land whose system of government is so offensive to me.

What happened during this two weeks? The CIA and the KGB had not disappeared. Afghanistan and Nicaragua had not gone away, not to mention Poland and Czechoslovakia. Lenin's picture was still evident on most walls. What had happened to my fear? It had encountered the love of a community of faith among people who had been seeking to worship and serve God for 1,000 years, often under extremely difficult circumstances. They are convinced that love can overcome fear and their conviction is contagious.

Where God's love finds expression, fear can be overcome. Reconciliation with those who offend us by their behavior or ideology can become a reality. It is in such a community that we can live from love and not from fear. Maybe in such a community we can learn to whistle a tune like:

Let goods and riches go, this mortal life also
The body they may kill, God's truth abideth still
His kingdom is forever.

Whistling in the wilderness is an appropriate exercise for Lent. The dangers and the temptations of the wilderness are real. So is the transforming presence of God whose nature is love and whose love has the power to overcome fear.