

Fear is a powerful emotion. Folks who study these things tell us that it's a primitive reaction designed to preserve our lives by preventing us from doing things that might cause us harm. Unfortunately, that's only half the story. Fear can also prevent us from doing the things that would make us most alive, like swimming, flying, climbing mountains and most importantly forming loving relationships with other people and with God. These involve considerable risk - indeed the most significant require us to put our lives on the line - and fear, especially fear of failure, is their natural companion.

The astonishing thing about failure is that while some folks are afraid of *failure*, many others are afraid of *success*. Common to both is fear of taking risk – entering into situations whose outcomes cannot be controlled, where losses of one sort or another appear to loom large before us. Fortunately, all of us can overcome our fears if we acknowledge them and work through them rather than suppressing or avoiding them. Wouldn't human life be so much the poorer if we always gave in to the counsel of our fears and never took risks?

Like any emotion we feel, fear has a story to tell us and to ignore it is to miss an opportunity to grow. Let me tell you a little story that might help explain what I mean.

There was a young family of five in a small town not too far from here – mom, dad and three small children. One day mom announced to the family at dinner that her mom, who lived in California by herself, was going to have a fairly significant operation and would need care at home for a while. She was going to travel out there for a few weeks to keep her company and arrange for longer term care.

The children had lots of questions, like “who was going to take care of them?” and “when would she be back?” and “was grandma going to be OK?” Mom and dad did their best to reassure the children that dad would take care of them while mom was away and that everything was going to be all right.

And so it came to pass that mom left to take care of *her* mother. Dad and the kids did pretty well for a while, but one night the youngest, Terry, came downstairs from her room after dad had said their prayers with them and put them all to bed.

Dad was reading a book and enjoying a cup of tea and was surprised to see little Terry.

“What’s the matter Terry – can’t sleep?” dad asked.

“No,” Terry told him, “I’m afraid to go to sleep.”

“Afraid of what?” dad asked.

“The monster under my bed,” Terry told him.

Dad was tempted to tell her that monsters didn’t exist, but then he realized it would be better to take his daughter seriously, so he closed his book, put down his tea and told her there hadn’t been monsters in the house for a long time now, so they had better go check.

“Is it the green, slimy kind or the furry sort?” dad asked, taking a flashlight from the kitchen and heading upstairs with Terry.

“I don’t know,” Terry said. “I ran out of my room before I could see.”

When they got upstairs, dad shone the light under the bed and sure enough, there were no monsters.

“Looks like it went away, Terry,” dad said.

“It’ll be back,” Terry said. “As soon as you go away.”

Dad thought he knew what was happening, so he sat down with Terry and said “You know, you’re right – it’s probably just hiding here, somewhere else in the room. But

you know, most monsters are just afraid of something themselves – they’re not really mean at all. They usually just want someone to listen to them. Maybe that’s all it wants.”

Terry wasn’t sure it was a good idea to talk with monsters, but dad said “Let’s take a risk and ask it what it wants to tell us.” So they sat there quietly for a short while.

Then Terry said, “I think it’s lonely. I think it misses its mom.”

Dad told Terry to tell the monster out loud that it could still love its mom even though she wasn’t around. Moms live inside our hearts as well as outside where we can see and touch them.

Terry did that but then looked her dad in the eye and said, “The monster is afraid that it will never see its mom again.”

Dad nodded and then said, “What should we tell the monster, Terry?”

Terry thought about it for a few moments and then said “You have to trust that you will see your mom again.”

Dad agreed that was a pretty good answer. It was kinda like the way we all trust that we’ll see Jesus some day. They sat there together quietly and said their prayers again. Then dad gave Terry a kiss, tucked her in and turned off the light. Terry didn’t come downstairs again; seems that the monster had gone away.

So it is dealing with the fears, the monsters, that Jesus tells us about in the gospel. Fear no one, Jesus says. But we do. Maybe it would be good from time to time to question the fear and find out what’s really behind it. Are we afraid to acknowledge Jesus because we’re afraid of what others might say or do to us? What’s really at stake? What’s the worst that can happen, anyway? Where does trust fit in? All good questions to ask our monster.

Does the last part of the gospel make us afraid? Didn't I deny Jesus back in 1952 when I was in the lunch line in second grade? Is it all over because I did that? We can question that fear directly by asking it how it happens to appear in the same gospel as the one in which we find Peter denying Jesus three times and the rest of the disciples running away. Didn't the same Jesus who warned us not to deny him before others actually gave his peace to the very same people who denied him? What's the message we'd want to give to this monster? Couldn't we be like little Terry and her monster, and simply counsel hope and trust?

At a deeper level, to deny Jesus is to choose to suppress the life of God within us, in all its richness. Questioning our fears and those of others; wrestling with them drawing upon the power of the Eucharist and the strengths of our faith, hope and love - to the extent that we are able to by habit and training - that's what it is to acknowledge Jesus.

The prophets knew this. They also knew where the power to confront fear and bear witness to God came from, even when they knew they had failed to acknowledge God.

Isaiah puts it this way:

I give you thanks, O LORD; though you have been angry with me, your anger has abated, and you have consoled me.

God indeed is my savior; I am confident and unafraid. My strength and my courage is the LORD, and he has been my savior.<sup>1</sup>

Are there monsters in our lives? If they're keeping us from having life to the full and acknowledging God, perhaps it's time to ask for God's own strength and courage, take on our fears, fearlessly if you will, and put them to bed for keeps.

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah, 12:2 *New American Bible*, <http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/isaiah/isaiah12.htm>