

July 18, 2010
Rev. Dr. Steven H. Koski
Living Streams
“Living Beyond Fear”
Psalm 42.1-2; John 7.37-38

I’m a lousy skier. Something about being uncoordinated and steep hills make for a dangerous mix. I have two brand new hips now so skiing is a skill I would like to develop. You could say I’m living in the right place to achieve that goal.

Several years ago when we were living in Chicago our family went on a ski vacation to Breckenridge, Colorado.

After an all day lesson, I made the fatal mistake of thinking I could keep up with my sons. When will I ever learn? We took a chairlift to the top. For a moment, I got distracted by the spectacular view. It seemed like you could see forever. It was breathtaking. But, then I looked downward. Yikes! My kind, generous, caring sons led their dear old dad to the steepest black diamond on the mountain. It looked to me like a straight, vertical drop off the end of the earth.

As I stood there and looked over the edge, I started to feel this kind of tightening-feeling throughout my body. I had some serious butterflies that felt a whole lot more like nausea than excitement. I didn’t want to let my sons know I was scared to death. I offered up some feeble excuse like the snow conditions didn’t look so great so maybe we should come back another time. You know, my way of saying, “Let’s turn around while we can and never come back again!”

Before I even finished my sentence my sons dropped in and were fearlessly swooshing down the mountain.

There I was, all by myself, left with my thoughts. Have you noticed when you are left with your thoughts your imagination is often far worse than reality?

I sensed this was a defining moment for me of either allowing courage or fear to control my decision-making. After several minutes of trying to summon courage from somewhere, I simply couldn't do it. I froze. I felt paralyzed by fear.

Fear can be like that, can't it? It is a deep and powerful emotion that can literally lock us up in place and leave us feeling hopeless, helpless and out of control, unable to move forward.

So there I was frozen in place. I thought the best thing to do is to retreat to safety.

I suspect you can guess what happened next. When you can't ski in the first place, trying to go backwards may not be the best idea. I ended up sideways and then got launched down the mountain not because I had courage but because I was really clumsy.

I survived. You couldn't call it skiing but I managed to get to the bottom of the hill mostly on my butt with only a bruised ego. My sons said, "Let's go do it again!" I said I needed to go use the bathroom.

Have you ever had moments in your life where you were gripped by fear? Not the kind of fear that appropriately warns you about the dangers of skiing down a cliff when you have no skills...but real, deep, personal, paralyzing fear...the kind of fear that keeps you up at night...fear about the future...fear about the unknown and the "what ifs"...fear that arises when there seems to be so little you are in control of...when there seems to be so little security.

Now, we're never in control, really, but when a crisis comes, like 9/11 or the bottom falling out of the stock market or what's going on right now with the housing market and employment, or a sudden illness, the reason you panic isn't the bad things happening, because bad things always happen, bad things happen every day.

The reason we panic in a crisis is the myth of security is exposed and all of a sudden we realize our vulnerability. Now the reality is we're always vulnerable. Every day our life is suspended by a thread, but we can literally live in the illusion of security, the illusion of control but every now and then we come face to face with the truth and fear grips us.

Have you noticed that each sunrise seems to bring fresh reasons for fear these days? Fear it seems has become an unwanted guest in the minds and hearts of most and is overstaying its welcome.

Oversize and rude, relentless and controlling, fear seems very reluctant to share the heart with happiness. Like a big boulder, fear has a way of impeding the flow of life and hope, energy and love. In fact the living streams of grace become frozen like a skier at the top of a cliff unable to move.

When fear shapes your life, safety and security become our gods. When safety and security become our gods, we worship the safe, insulated, self-focused, risk-free life. We are happy to splash around in the shallow end of stagnant pools and avoid living streams because we can't control and don't really know where the currents of living streams will take us.

Can the safety lover do anything great? Can the risk-averse accomplish the impossible? For God? For others?

The fear-filled life cannot love deeply. Love is risky, messy, unpredictable. The fear-filled life carefully calculates and measures love.

The fear-filled life cannot love unconditionally because it expects some kind of guarantee or return. The fear-filled life dare not dream wild dreams like eradicating poverty, eliminating hunger, experiencing peace because you can't change those dreams and stay in your comfort zones . . . it will cost. Fear restricts and doesn't trust the expansiveness of God. Fear holds back and doesn't trust the generosity of God. Fear retreats and doesn't trust the promises of God.

Fear is like a big boulder impeding the flow of the living streams of grace and mercy, love and compassion. Flow of living streams freeze in fear.

No wonder the Bible addresses the issue of fear more than any other. The most common command in the Bible, 366 times it is given, one for every day of the year and one for leap year... DON'T BE AFRAID. God says, "I'm with you. Fear not." 21 times Jesus says, "Don't be afraid...have courage...take heart." Jesus takes our fears seriously saying this one statement more than any other: "Don't be afraid."

We can't stop fear from knocking on the door especially in the middle of the night when we are most vulnerable. We may not be able to stop fear from showing up, just don't invite it in for dinner, and for God's sake, don't offer it a bed to sleep in where it can become comfortable and stay.

Fear definitely fills our world but it doesn't have to fill our hearts. It says in the book of Timothy, "God has not given us a spirit of fear but a spirit of courage." Jesus said, "Don't let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God. Trust in me." Do we dare trust there is something larger than our fears?

A man was in a grocery store with his two-year old son who was cranky, whiny and crying. You know, the kind of thing you've seen before in other people's children.

The dad was exasperated trying everything to calm down his child. At one point, he's walking through the store saying, "Calm down Billy. Take a deep breath Billy. Be strong Billy. It's going to be okay Billy. You can handle this."

A woman hears him and says, "You're very patient with your son Billy."

The dad says, "My son's name is Thomas. I'm Billy."
This father tries everything and nothing works. Finally, in desperation, he picks his son up, holds him to his chest and starts to sing, "I love you, Tommy. I'm glad you're my son. I like the way you sound when you laugh. You are such a gift to me. I'm so glad you're my boy and I'm so glad to be your dad. I love you with a love so big...bigger than you can imagine. I will never stop loving you."

Tommy's eyes get real big, and he gets real quiet. It's a goofy song. The words don't rhyme. Dad sings off key. It doesn't matter. When the child hears the song, whatever was making him fussy or sad or scared doesn't bother him any more. For that moment, the goodness of his father's love felt in his father's song is stronger than what was making him cry.

Tommy's eyes get real big, and he throws his hands up and says, "Sing it to me again, Daddy! Sing it to me again!"

That's what we celebrate in Baptism – there's a song in our heart and if we can quiet our fears long enough we might hear it...a song that says, "You are my beloved child. I am with you and I will never leave you or forsake you and my love is stronger than anything you ever have to be afraid of. There are no boulders, not

even death itself, that can hold back the living streams of God's grace and love."

In today's Bible reading, Jesus reminds us of these living streams flowing deep in our belly that lead us to life beyond fear.

Jesus said in a loud voice, 'Let anyone who is thirsty, come to Me and drink.'

Thirsty here means to be discontented, unhappy, unsettled, afraid. Have you ever noticed how fear and anxiety can leave you with a dry mouth?

Jesus says, "Let any one who is thirsty, come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, will have streams of living water flowing from within."

Now "believe" here doesn't mean intellectual beliefs. It means "to trust"... "to give your heart". Whoever gives their heart...places their trust in me, will discover streams of living water flowing from within.

You can give your heart to fear or you can give your heart to that which is greater than fear.

One translation says, "Whoever trust in me, out of your belly will flow rivers of living water." Not only will you experience life and strength and courage, you will become a source of life to other people.

The belly is that place deep inside you. It is your core. Jesus is talking about your core, that place way deep inside you...that place deep inside you that often feels empty or hollow late at night, the place where the butterflies flow.

The word Jesus uses here for within is the word Coralia ... a word from which we get the word 'colitis'. Colitis is that sickness often related to stress, anxiety and fear, way deep down inside us. Jesus is saying "Trust...give your heart to a love stronger than your fear and out of your belly will flow energy and hope and joy and courage – and you will become a source of life to other people.

Jesus is trying to say you will never get to a life beyond fear by seeking greater safety and security. Security is an illusion. The only way to live beyond fear is learning to trust and place your life in the hands of God who promises that even the greatest threat of all, death, is nothing to be afraid of because we are loved with a love stronger than death – when you trust, give your heart to that love – out of your belly will flow energy and hope and joy and courage – and you will be a source of life to others. You are freed from fear because nothing can really harm you.

I want to share with you a real growth edge for me at the moment that I have been thinking a lot about lately.

When I wake up in the morning sometimes I'm tempted to be overwhelmed by all the stuff I think I've got to do...all the stuff I think I'm responsible for...all the stuff I assume it's my job to manage or fix. I fool myself into thinking, "It's up to me."

So I think about all the problems in my life, in your life, in our church, in our community, in the world...all the problems I don't know how to solve...and all the really important outcomes that I can't really control no matter how hard I try – my kids, my family, my relationships, my church – and sometimes, to tell you the truth, it's like I'm back on that mountain looking over a cliff, frozen in fear.

These days, when so much seems out of control and so much seems uncertain, I spend time in quiet and stillness in the morning

and the voice of fear always shows up. I don't fight it because when you fight it, it just gets louder. Trying not to be afraid doesn't really work. I just notice it. And I trust there is another voice. I listen. I can hear God whispering to me in my belly, "Steven, you and I are going to walk through this deal together. When everything else is outside your control, when you can't figure it out, when you can't see the way ahead, when you realize you can't do it on your own, trust me...trust me, I am bigger than your problems. I am bigger than your failures. I am bigger than your regrets. I am bigger than your sin and guilt. Trust me, I am bigger than your fear. I am bigger than your financial insecurity, bigger than your broken relationships, bigger than your cancer, bigger than even death itself...bigger than all of it."

Fear shows up. That's for sure. But we can trust there is a love stronger than your fear...may that love fill your heart today and flow from your belly that you might be a source of life to others.