When Fear Drives Our Choices

Exodus 32:1-14

Grace Hills Baptist Church

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15 years ago, on a sunny Tuesday, I was walking across the Virginia Tech campus on my way back from a public speaking class. I ran into someone in front of Owens Dining Hall who mumbled something about a plane hitting the World Trade Center, but I don’t think I realized anything more was happening until I got back to the cadet area on Upper Quad. At the foot of the steps, I saw a cadet named Bradshaw, one of the battalion commanders that semester. She was a tough, no-nonsense senior – but she was sitting on the step crying that morning. She told me another plane had hit the Pentagon, where her father worked, and she hadn’t heard from him yet.

Why did she tell me, a lowly sophomore who she just happened to run into, about this? Well, for one thing, I was in my first few weeks of ministry as a chaplain, and she knew that. But, I think, more than that, I was a friendly face in a difficult time. She was in the midst of uncertainty and, yes, fear, and she just needed to tell someone. Over the next several hours, I joined hundreds more cadets in following every update on the lounge televisions and CNN’s webpage – this was in the days before social media like Facebook. My own horror grew even as I tried to comfort other cadets who had some connection to New York or the Pentagon. The images of the towers coming down, the wreckage of a plane in Pennsylvania, the gaping hole in the side of the Pentegon – these images were seared into our national consciousness.

For a time, the tragedy of 9/11 served to unite our nation. In the days immediately following the attack, we found widespread support for our national leaders, outpourings of financial and material aid for New Yorkers and families affected by the attacks, and prayer services for those around the country needing spiritual counsel. Yet even as we drew together, we also became more fearful. We viewed others with suspicion, especially if they looked foreign or spoke differently. We began to see instances of violence in our communities against Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, and Jews, incidents that only increased as our country became involved in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.[[1]](#footnote-1) Even today, there is a great deal of anger and hatred directed towards foreigners or people who look different – and much of that anger and hatred is driven by fear. In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, fear caused us as a nation, and if we are honest with ourselves, at times us as individuals, to do some things that are odds with who we say we are, who we want to be.

This isn’t unusual. Fear is hardwired into our DNA, it seems, a primitive survival tool that can drive us quickly into a fight-or-flight response to danger or threat. By its very nature, fear can bypass our rational thinking, leading us to reactions we would never have imagined. Take, for example, our response when we are walking down a street and we see someone different than us approach. In our logical minds, we might firmly believe that all people are equal and deserving of respect and the benefit of the doubt – but in that situation, we might just walk a little faster, grab our bags a little tighter, and keep a watchful eye on the other person. That’s what fear can do to us in the moment. And there are plenty of times when that fear reaction can be helpful – otherwise, why would we have it? Yet when it comes right down to it, when fear guides our choices in life, we can make some really bad decisions.

This is what we see on display in our Scripture reading this morning. The story of Israel and the Golden Calf is one we probably remember from childhood Sunday School or VBS, but it is an incredibly rich story – because it is an incredibly human story. Most sermons on this text focus on the idolatry, the moral failure of the Israelites and the political machinations of Aaron, Moses’ brother. Yet at its root, this passage is all about a decision made out of fear, and we find that out in verse 1. “When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, ‘Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’”[[2]](#footnote-2)

At this very moment in the story, Moses is on Mt. Sinai. He has led the people out of slavery in Egypt. He has been God’s conduit for mighty acts of liberation, miracles and signs and wonders that broke their chains of servitude. He has reminded the people, over and over again, that the very God whose presence is with them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night is a God who wants to care for them and protect them and guide them. And even as their fear takes hold, he is receiving the Torah, the twin tablets of the Law, that spells out the responsibilities of the people and the responsibilities of God. Israel is about to receive something that no one else on the earth is to receive: most favored people status in the eyes of God. They will have a reciprocal relationship with the Creator of the universe, blessed by him and given a purpose through his invitation to join him in blessing the world.

And yet…they are afraid. Moses has been away for a while, alone on the mountain with God for forty days. Even at the very beginning of this encounter, as they stood around the base of the mountain, they were frightened by the thunder and lightning, the smoking mountain and sounding trumpet that accompanied God’s presence on Mount Sinai. Exodus 20 tells us that “they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, and said to Moses, ‘You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.’”[[3]](#footnote-3) They sent Moses to interact with God for them – but now, they are afraid that Moses is gone. They are afraid of a God who had the power to free them from slavery – what will he do with them now that he has them? What did he do with Moses – why isn’t Moses back? What if God makes demands on us? What if God has plans for us? What if we don’t like whatever Moses brings back from the mountain? And so, as Moses takes copious notes and God prepares the stone tablets cementing his relationship with Israel, far below the people clamor around Aaron, giving into their fears. “Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.”

Aaron, at that moment, should have stood up and said no. He was, after all, Moses’ right-hand man, his brother and second-in-command. He had already been tapped by God to be the priest of Israel, the person who would be the intermediary between the people and their God.[[4]](#footnote-4) Aaron should have been able to speak out and dissuade the people from this fear-based course of action – or at least make the effort. Instead, what did Aaron do? He went right along with it. The people asked for a god, an idol, and his first response was to start making the plans and requisitioning the materials needed. Was he afraid that something had happened to Moses? Was he afraid that God would make demands of his people – and of him – that Aaron wouldn’t want to do? Was he afraid that God might actually expect something of him? Was he simply afraid of not doing what the people wanted?

This last one is perhaps the most likely, because later in the chapter, after our reading for today, Aaron will face his angry brother and point the finger of blame at the people. “‘Moses said to Aaron, ‘What did this people do to you that you have brought so great a sin upon them?’ And Aaron said, ‘Do not let the anger of my lord burn hot; you know the people, that they are bent on evil.’”[[5]](#footnote-5) Beneath that self-serving answer, Aaron betrays his own motives: he was afraid of the people that he was supposed to serve well and to lead, and his fear led to ruin for his people. We read on in the story and find that the people are rioting, and Moses has to impose some version of martial law to bring order; 3000 people died in the process.[[6]](#footnote-6) And we find out in Deuteronomy 9 that Aaron only escaped his own destruction through the intervention of Moses.[[7]](#footnote-7) Aaron’s fear led him to a decision he should not have made – a decision that compounded the effects of the fearful choice of the people of Israel.

Fear can elicit powerful reactions in us, not all of them good. Fear of their child failing can lead a parent to tear down someone else’s child. Fear of disappointing a parent can lead a child to hide or withdraw. Fear of failure can lead an athlete to give less than 100%. Fear can lead a soldier to cower in a ditch or injure themselves to get out of combat. Fear can lead a politician to make outrageous claims, and fear can lead a voter to choose that politician. Fear of what we can lose can make us choose against forming a new friendship or relationship. Fear of what we may find out can make us choose against going to the doctor. Fear of the unknown can make us choose against taking a new opportunity or exploring new paths in life. Fear can make us choose things we would never imagine choosing in a million years.

It doesn’t have to be that way, though. Throughout the Bible, we find that fear is not the path God wants his people to walk. Fear is not what God wants to control us. Fear is not something God wants to influence our choices and our decisions. In fact, when I started looking for what the Bible had to say about fear this week, I found verse after verse that warns and commands us not to give fear a foothold in our lives. Moses himself tells the people of Israel in Deuteronomy 31:8, “It is the Lord who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not leave you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed.”

The rest of the Old Testament concurs. Joshua 1:9 tells us, “Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.” David, in the psalms, records his rejection of fear in the light of God’s goodness with such verses as “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me,” and “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?”[[8]](#footnote-8) The wisdom writer, in Proverbs 29:25, gives the practical reminder, “The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is safe.” And the prophet Isaiah gives us the beautifully poetic promise of God: “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

Turning to the New Testament, we find that fear is explicitly not part of what Jesus was all about. He tells his disciples, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.”[[10]](#footnote-10) The apostles and the early church picked up on this, and the letters of the New Testament are replete with reminders and encouragements for the followers of Jesus to make choices based not on fear, but on trust in God, God’s love, and God’s power. Paul tells us in Romans 8 that the gift we have received from God is not a spirit of slavery to fear, but a spirit of adoption as sons of God.[[11]](#footnote-11) He builds on this in his letter to his young protégé, Timothy, when he says, “For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.”[[12]](#footnote-12) The author of Hebrews joins the chorus in a verse we heard just a few weeks ago in Hebrews 13:6: “So we can confidently say, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?’” And 1 John, the short letter highlighting the love of God found in Christ, declares forcefully, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

What does this long litany of verses about fear and its place – or lack thereof – in the life of a follower of Christ have to do with us and our choices? Everything in the world! You see, it is easy to memorize these passages – many of us probably have, at least the one from Psalm 23 about fearing no evil. And it is easy to claim to believe that in Christ, we should not let our hearts be troubled or afraid. But to live it out? That’s tough. It’s tough to live out in a world with heart disease and cancer, car crashes and sports injuries, gang members and terrorists, nuclear weapons and stock market crashes. It’s tough to live out a fearless faith in a fearful world – and so the temptation for us, as it was for the Israelites, is to give into fear. The temptation is to make our decisions in life, our choices, out of our fear.

Going back to the story of the Israelites and the Golden Calf, we find there is one person in the passage who does not make choices based on fear: Moses. Moses, who has spent 40 days up on the mountain with God, 40 days hearing the details of the covenant, the promise God wants to make with Israel, 40 days experiencing a spiritual high we can probably not really comprehend, that same Moses hears the clamor. He is the only person there who probably has REASON to fear: he’s been out of touch with the people, and now he finds out their infidelity to the Lord is whipping God up into an angry frenzy. Could God’s anger wash over Moses as collateral damage? If Moses questions God, could he be condemned? Could the people kill Moses when he returns? Moses had some legitimate concerns, and we wouldn’t hold it against him if he was afraid.

Yet Moses doesn’t make a choice based on fear. Moses made his choice based on something else: faith that God was who Moses thought he was, and that God would do what God had promised to do. God is rightly angry at the Israelites here. After all, he did recruit a leader for them, display his power in ten mighty signs, free the people from slavery, save them from a pursuing army, feed them in the desert, and lead them to Mt. Sinai. Why did he do all of that? To tie himself to them – to build a relationship and establish a covenant that would lead to their blessing. And before the metaphorical ink is even dry on the stone tablets, the people of Israel have abandoned him for some gold-plated bovine made up of their own jewelry. And people say the God of the Old Testament is aloof and distant? He’s about as relatable as I can imagine, because I can imagine I’d be pretty ticked off, too!

Moses, though, has faith: faith that God is more faithful to the covenant than he is controlled by his anger, faith that the God he saw on display in the burning bush and in Egypt and in the desert is going to follow through on his promises, even if he’s a little mad right now. So Moses, instead of cowering in a corner or throwing his people under the bus or washing his hands of the whole affair, instead he does what a surprising number of people in the Bible do: he reminds God of who God is and what God has promised. Moses chose the path of faith, not of fear, and it mattered: verse 14 of Exodus 32 tells us, “And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.”

There are going to be plenty of things that life brings our way that cause us to be afraid. Maybe we’ll get the news in a doctor’s office, news that makes our blood run cold. Maybe we’ll feel our car skid on the ice, causing our stomach to clinch. Maybe we’ll turn on the news and see smoke streaming out of a building again and know that our country is under attack, and we’ll feel paralyzed by fear. Maybe a financial crisis will hit us, and we’ll feel there’s no way out. Maybe we’ll even scare ourselves with our weaknesses, our mistakes, our tempers and our behaviors. Those are all things that can, and probably should, make us afraid, at least a little. But we don’t have to make our choices out of that fear. We know, as Moses did, who God is: a God who loves us dearly, a God who wants to bless us, a God who wants to give us a purpose in life. And we know, as Moses did, what God has promised: strength for the fight, hope for the darkest days, and peace that passes human understanding. Even in the face of the worst that can happen to us – pain and death – we have the promise of Jesus: “If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

Today, will you join me in making a promise to God? There are lots of voices in our world trumpeting fear. There are even more voices trying to profit from our fear and the decisions our fear leads us to make. But we are not to be people of fear. We are to be people of faith. Will you promise, along with me, that we will try each day not to give into fear? Will you promise that, when someone tries to play on your fears, you won’t just give into your fears? Will you promise that, when fear does arise, that you will remind yourself that God does love you and is with you through the darkest valley? Will you promise that you won’t make your choices out of fear? It’s a hard promise to keep for me – and I imagine it will be for you, as well. But together in faith, and especially together with Christ, we can be people who live by faith, not by fear. And do you know what? Our choices will better, our *lives* will be better, because we’ve cast aside the idol of fear and built upon the firm foundation of faith. Will you make that promise with me? Let us pray.

1. http://pluralism.org/research-report/post-9-11-hate-crime-trends-muslims-sikhs-hindus-and-jews-in-the-u-s/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Exodus 32:1 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Exodus 20:18-19 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Exodus 28:1 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Exodus 32:21-22 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Exodus 32:28 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Deuteronomy 9:20 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Psalm 23:4, 27:1 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Isaiah 43:1b-3a [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. John 14:27 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Romans 8:15 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. 2 Timothy 1:7 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. 1 John 4:18 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. John 14:3 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)