

Guided by faith, not fear

By [Teri McDowell Ott](#)

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People are always surprised when I tell them one of my biggest fears is public speaking. I get very anxious before I preach—just ask my husband. And, of course, the bigger the audience, the bigger my fear. You should have seen me before preaching at our college’s baccalaureate service last May. I was a wreck.

I have gotten better, though. The first sermon I delivered was in seminary when I was asked to fill in for a pastor at a small church. I decided to do it only because I knew I had to face my fear at some point and I knew this church had nice people. It took me six months to write that first sermon and when the Sunday finally arrived every muscle in my back and neck was twisted so tight from stress I thought they were going to have to balance me up there on a backboard.

So I’ve shortened the window on how long it takes me to write a sermon. And I’m not having panic attacks anymore before I preach. But still, if there is one thing that would tempt me to give up this whole calling to ministry, it would be this fear. I’d much prefer to write up my thoughts and hand them out for people to read at their leisure.

In [Exodus 32](#) we hear the story of how the Israelites demanded that Aaron make a new god for them, a golden calf, because Moses was talking to God on top of Mt. Sinai and they were afraid he might never return. The passage is a warning to all of us about the sin of idolatry. But clearly it was the Israelites’ fear that led them astray. They waited for Moses to return, and waited, and waited some more, until their minds started to wonder, “What if he never comes back?” “What will we do out here in the wilderness without a leader?” “We are so far from civilization, how will we survive? And what will we do without Moses to connect us to God?”

My husband, Dan, leaves for an hourlong walk every morning. He doesn’t take his phone—which I hate, because if he is not home in an hour I start to worry. And since I have no way of contacting him my mind starts to wonder, “Has he hurt himself? Did he turn his ankle? Has some student he failed gotten their revenge? Has he been attacked and eaten by wolves? Or an angry mob of alpaca? (There’s an alpaca farm near us and they are *not* friendly beasts.) When the person you love is not where you expect them to be you tend to worry—you get scared.

And when we get scared, we often don’t think rationally (angry mob of alpaca), and we tend to make poor choices—like turning away from God, melting down all our jewelry to make and worship a golden calf.

Fear itself is natural. Fear is human. We all know fear. When the scriptures repeatedly tell us not to fear, I don’t think this means we are to deny this all-too-human emotion. Instead, we are told not to fear because this raw, powerful emotion often tempts us stray from the faithful path.

Students fear doing poorly on an exam, so they are tempted to cheat.

We fear being ostracized by our peers or our colleagues at work, so we are tempted to compromise our values and act in a way that we know is not right.

We fear losing what we have, so we deny others what they justly deserve.

We fear our neighbor, we fear not having enough, so we build walls and fences to keep us apart instead of bigger and longer tables so more can be welcomed to the feast.

We fear for our lives and the lives of those we love, so we are tempted to worship our guns and our military. We condone violence, convincing ourselves that peace simply isn't possible.

White society fears the black male we meet in the street, so we are tempted to detain him, shoot him, and kill him.

Yes, fear often leads us away from God and from God's expectations of us.

So what are we to do? Because fear will always be a part of our human reality.

Many religious traditions talk about the state of enlightenment as a spiritual goal. Enlightenment involves both the mind and the heart and can be described as a state of being awake or completely open to emotions, such as sadness and pain—our own or others—which fosters empathy and compassion within us. Enlightenment is also connected to our ability to love—the heart opens, flowers, blooms in this state of enlightenment leading us to see as God sees—leading us to see through eyes of love.

Fear blocks us from achieving enlightenment because fear builds walls around our hearts—walls that we think can protect us—like the fence around our home, or the wall built along our border, or the wall of prejudice and ignorance we allow to go unchallenged—or the emotional walls of anger, indifference, arrogance, or pride. We think, in our fear, that these walls can protect us. But the enlightened heart knows that the only thing that can actually protect us is love, compassion, genuine care and concern for others, and the peace that comes when we let go of the illusion that we are in control.

So, returning to Exodus 32, how would this story have been different had Aaron sat his people down for prayer and meditation once he recognized their fear? How would this story have been different had Aaron acknowledged their fear in genuine love and compassion, but then (instead of jumping to build an alternative god) he sat down, got quiet, turned inward, and focused on opening himself and his people to the living God? How would this story have been different had Aaron guided his people by faith, rather than fear? How would your story be different? How would our story be different?

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