



**North Shore
Congregational
Church**

FOX POINT, WI

From the Pulpit...

“Moving Beyond Fear”

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

Daniel 6:10-18; Exodus 1:8-22

September 20, 2026

Fear is an extraordinarily powerful force in life – and one that can have deep impact on the movement of our days. If you have been tuning into the daily reflections on social media, you heard me this past Monday talk about my changing relationship with roller coasters. As a kid, I would ride them endlessly. I spent three years working at Six Flags down in Gurnee and remember one late-night employee event during which my buddy and I rode the front row of Iron Wolf – their stand-up coaster of the time – 11 consecutive times without getting off the ride. Today, my claustrophobic, control-freak of a mind can’t seem to cope with as much as the very prospect of being on a stalled coaster with some sort of a shoulder-harness locking me in place. Give me a lap belt that I know I could wiggle or cut out of if need be, and I’m fine! I’m not worried something’s going to happen. I don’t think it’s going to fall off the tracks. I’m not concerned about being hurt. There is nothing sensible, logical, or rational about it in any way whatsoever. My mind simply cannot cope with the possibility of being trapped in that way.

My point, of course, is that fear is an extraordinarily powerful force in life – and one that can have deep impact on the movement of our days. It’s not always logical. It is often irrational. But it is very real in those manners and moments in which we experience it. And, whether we want to admit it or not, we all experience it in our myriad ways. The question, of course, is what we do in the face of it.

I’ve long loved the familiar quote from Nelson Mandela in which he said, “I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear. Far too often, courage is understood not as the antidote but as the absence of fear – which simply could not be farther from the truth. If we have no fear, there’s no need for courage. Mandela’s words are a powerful reminder that fear is normal – a shared experience among us all – and that the courageous among us are not those who are fearless, but those who act in spite of it. That, to me, is one of those top ten life lessons we need to grasp in our developing years.

There’s another quote, however, that takes it that same notion a step further. It has often been attributed to Franklin D. Roosevelt and is one that starts just like the line from Nelson Mandela but puts what I argue is a very powerful spin on the second half of the phrase. “Courage is not the absence of fear,” the quote goes, “but rather the assessment that something else is more important than fear.” I absolutely love that notion. Let me say that again. “Courage is not the

absence of fear, but rather the assessment that something else is more important than fear.” Mandela’s perspective of courage as the conquering of fear and not the absence of it is a critical understanding of our experience of life’s most ardent challenges. But seeing courage as the choice we make to set something else as more important than our fear – that takes us to a whole new place and brings me to the second reading I have to share with you this morning.

For those who were here with us last week, I want to note that we are backtracking, a bit, from where we were last Sunday. Our service last week drew our attention to that dialog between Moses and God at the burning bush that sets the stage for all that will unfold in the remainder of the Exodus story. Today, however, at the end of this first week of our fall journey, I want to take our attention back to the moment (or moments) that allowed Moses to even be around for that burning bush conversation so many years later.

As we move from Genesis into Exodus, we are told that the generation of Joseph and his brothers have died, as has the king of Egypt who knew and respected Joseph. In the interim, the Hebrew people have grown in number and are increasingly being seen as a threat to the power and control of Pharaoh, the Egyptian king. That, then, is the backdrop that leads to the story that unfolds starting in verse 8 of chapter 1.

Now a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. 9 He said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. 10 Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.” 11 Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. 12 But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. 13 The Egyptians subjected the Israelites to hard servitude 14 and made their lives bitter with hard servitude in mortar and bricks and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.

15 The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, 16 “When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women and see them on the birthstool, if it is a son, kill him, but if it is a daughter, she shall live.” 17 But the midwives feared God;

Now, I’m going to pause for a moment here, because that word, ‘fear’ in the Old Testament can be a little misleading at times, and in a sermon about fear, it’s even more critical. The Hebrew word that is often translated as ‘fear’ has two very different meanings. In some cases, it means exactly what we imagine when hear word – it implies being worried about some negative consequence, being ‘afraid.’ In others, however, the implication is much more about understanding the power and/or majesty of something and not that one is necessarily afraid of it. There’s a reverence – a standing in awe of – that is the real implication of the word. So, when we hear that these midwives ‘fear’ God, and when we read that word elsewhere in the Old Testament, we are not talking about being afraid. We are talking about a full-hearted recognition of the power and majesty of God – standing in awe of God. Back to our reading...

But the midwives feared [stood in awe of] God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. 18 So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this and allowed the boys to live?” 19 The midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.” 20 So God dealt well with the midwives, and the people multiplied and became very strong. 21 And because the midwives feared [stood in awe of] God, he gave them families. 22 Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, “Every son that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every daughter live.”

Let me remind you, again, of that quote often attributed to FDR. “Courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the assessment that something else is more important than fear.” Do you see where I’m going here? Those Hebrew midwives had every reason to be afraid – to be terrified – of Pharaoh. He had all the power of this world. He had the armies, the authority, the strength – everything that was needed to make their lives miserable, if not end their lives altogether! They were constantly surrounded by the oppression of their people – by the ruthless treatment of their family and friends that filled most every moment of most every day. And now, they were being shown that Pharaoh was willing to go as far as to kill innocent babies for the sake of his worldly designs. I’m not sure ‘afraid’ comes anywhere close to what I presume must have been the sensibility for these women. Everything they were experiencing was framed in the power and ruthlessness of Pharaoh. But still, they blatantly disobeyed a direct order from the king of Egypt!

In the latter portions of that reading, of course, they do their best to obfuscate and explain away what they’d done – they weren’t going to recklessly throw their willful noncompliance in Pharaoh’s face – but they made the choice, and I would argue that Exodus makes abundantly clear why they made that choice. “*But the midwives feared God...*” we read in verse 17. “*And because the midwives feared God,*” verse 21 tells us. Again, we have to understand that word ‘fear’ as not ‘afraid’ but as reverence and awe. So, the fundamental truth we discover is that these midwives made a conscious choice that their reverence and awe of God was more important than their fear of Pharaoh, and everything that unfolds in the chapters of Exodus that follow – the call of Moses, the plagues in Egypt, the crossing of the sea, the deliverance of the Israelites from that oppression... – are a direct result of that very assessment.

And that’s far from the only example. In the following verses Moses’ mother decides that the life of her son is more important than her own that she puts at risk, so she hides Moses for 3 months in an effort to spare him from the brutality of Pharaoh. Once Moses is too big to hide, he’s set in a basket in the Nile and it’s Pharaoh’s own daughter who decides that her compassion for this Hebrew child is more important than the edict of her own father. Then, it’s Moses’ sister Miriam, at a very young age, who decides to step into the fray and manipulate things so that Moses ends up right back with his mother to nurse him!

It is not inconsequential to note, here, that in this unfolding narrative that quickly becomes all about Moses, Pharaoh, and a little bit of Aaron sprinkled in, it’s the women who made it happen. In this patriarchal society it’s the courage of the midwives, and Moses’ mother, and Pharaoh’s daughter, and Miriam, and at a later moment in chapter 4 Moses’ wife Zipporah, who make their courageous assessments and that allow for all that comes next. Everything that follows in the

Exodus story yet to unfold is grounded in the choice that these women made that something was more important than the fear that they faced.

It's a story we see play out repeatedly in the Biblical narrative. We shared that lead-up to the moment of Daniel being thrown into the lions' den not because of the wonders of God that unfolded in that den, but because of that fundamental choice that Daniel made leading up to it. Daniel's fellow leaders in the kingdom grow jealous of Daniel's favor in the eyes of the king, so they plot against him. They get the king to sign a restriction against worshipping anyone or anything other than the king for 30 days. The king signs it, Daniel worships anyway, and the king is forced to throw Daniel to the lions. We know the glory of what comes next, but I point today to the power of the choice that preceded that moment of God's glory – the choice that something, that his devotion to God, was more important than the fear of the king he undoubtedly faced.

“Courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the assessment that something else is more important than fear.” Courage as the conquering of fear and not the absence of it is a critical understanding of our experience of life's most ardent challenges. But seeing courage as the choice we make to set something else as more important than our fear – that takes us to a whole new place. I'm pretty convinced that God doesn't care in the least that I'm not getting on the Superman coaster down at Great America. Fear, however, is an extraordinarily powerful force in life – and one that can have deep impact on the movement of our days. And, sometimes, we have to step back and consider whether or not there is something that we need to decide is more important than that fear.