

WGUMC Advent 2 December 4, 2016 Luke 1:26-38  
"Fantastic Love and Where to Find It"

The word "fantastic" has a long list of synonyms. It can mean irrational, wild, absurd, far-fetched, nonsensical, incredible, unthinkable, doubtful, and dubious. But it can also mean marvelous, wonderful, sensational, superb, excellent, dazzling and breathtaking. The fantastic beasts in the new Harry Potter movie are all of these things.

In the forward to the book of the same name, Albus Dumbledore writes, "...The amusing creatures described hereafter are fictional and cannot hurt you." But no one except Newt Scamander, the magizoologist who "wrote" the book, believes this. In the movie, Newt keeps trying to tell the wizards and No-mag's, "Don't be afraid."

In the Bible, too, God and the angels are always saying that with about the same results. The problem is that they say it precisely when there are lots of good reasons to be afraid!

It's like when the dentist says, "This won't hurt," just as he is about to drill into your tooth!

For instance, Hagar and her son are left to die in the desert, when an angel comes and says, "Do not be afraid."

[Gen 21:17] When Joseph discovers to his shock and shame that Mary is pregnant and wants to divorce her quietly, an angel appears to him in a dream and says, "Do not be afraid."

[Mt 1:20] And when Jesus dies and his body disappears from the tomb, an angel says to the frantic women, "Do not be afraid...." [Mt 28:5-6]

As you can see, angels in the Bible tend to show up when something very big or bad is about to happen, so you can see why folks would be afraid of them. The angel Gabriel comes and says, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." But that is not exactly comforting, and she must be thinking, "Ok, God, what do you want from me?" What the angel goes on to say is simply fantastic, by that I mean

irrational, wild, absurd, far-fetched, nonsensical, incredible, unthinkable, doubtful, and dubious!

Mary is going to conceive and bear a son and name him Jesus. This is a pretty wild, absurd idea, considering that Mary is a virgin. "How can this be?" she asks, but the angel's answer is still more fantastic: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." Translation: God will impregnate you.

Whoa. To an unwed teenager, that can't be good news. Mary must be terrified. And if she has any hope that she can keep this a secret, the angel dashes it. Mary is not going to be able to remain anonymous because her child will become famous. He will be holy. People will call him the Son of God.

It's not hard to understand why Mary is so afraid. And this is perhaps our own biggest fear. Not that God will impregnate us, but that some power will come upon us and take away our impregnability. Something or Someone will penetrate all our

defenses and expose all our secrets. Then God and everyone else will be able to see us for who we really are. And that is frightening. If they see our weaknesses, they might reject us. If they see our strengths, they might select us. Either way, they have power over us.

This fear—of being vulnerable, of losing control of our identity, our destiny—is a wild beast that chases us throughout our lives. Like Newt Scamander in the movie, we try to keep this beast locked up in a suitcase, but it keeps stealing away and messing up our day.

Let me tell you about the beast that nearly ruined my day. It was early May 2015. I had just been diagnosed with breast cancer. Hank and I were hiking with our dog at Calero County Park. We were rounding a turn in the trail when suddenly, we came face-to-face with a mountain lion about ten yards away. The lion was obviously looking for lunch and the dog on the leash was like bait on the line. Being in front, I stopped in my

tracks and slowly passed the dog to my husband behind me. Great. Now I was alone. Having no rocks or sticks in my pocket, I began to wave my arms and shout to scare the lion away. After what seemed like an eternity (maybe 20 or 30 seconds), the cat finally turned and slipped away into the woods.

There's nothing like a close encounter of the mountain lion kind to make you feel vulnerable. And in the next few weeks, while running alone, I saw two more lions at two different parks. And I got to thinking that maybe God was trying to tell me something. Maybe God sent an angel in the form of a lion to tell me that cancer is enough of a beast, and I should find a safer trail while undergoing treatment.

That's how I started running in Henry Cowell State Park and how I fell in love with the redwoods there. The trees were truly my angels. Each week, they waved their branches in the wind like wings, saying to me, "Do not be afraid." The forest gave me new faith, and over time, my fear turned to love, and I

marveled at how close to God I could feel while getting chemotherapy. Just being in the trees helped me to "let it be." Their strength, their resilience, helped me to live with my vulnerability.

So fear drove me into the trees, but it was love that kept me there. What I experienced was a different kind of birth, not virginal, but for me, it was original. And humbled by the majesty of it, all I could say, was "Here am I, a servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Mountain lions are fantastic beasts. Without them, I wouldn't have found such a fantastic love, really marvelous, wonderful, sensational, superb, excellent, dazzling and breathtaking. So today I have some advice for how to deal with fear. Unlike the fantastic beasts in J.K. Rowlings' book, our fears are not fictional, and they can hurt us. But we have to remember that they can also teach us.

So what if we treated our fears the way Newt Scamander treated his fantastic beasts? He named and claimed each one of them. And instead of trying to hunt them down and kill them, he studied them, so he could learn all he could from them.

What if we did the same with our fears? I believe that by God's grace, we could learn a whole lot about love from them.

So does Wendell Berry. In fact, he wrote a poem about trees and fears. I read it for the first time just a few weeks ago in an email from Mount Tam UMC in Mill Valley. Kim Smith is pastor there, and she was reflecting on what was a real beast of a presidential election. In her message, she said, "Life goes on—and poetry softens the ache, refocuses the fear, allows me the grace to breathe." And then she shared an excerpt from one of his poems:

I go among the trees and sit still.  
All my stirring becomes quiet  
around me like circles on water.  
My tasks lie in their places  
where I left them, asleep like cattle.

Then what is afraid in me comes  
and lives a while in my sight.  
What it fears in me leaves me,  
and the fear of me leaves it.  
It sings, and I hear its song.

Then what I am afraid of comes.  
I live for a while in its sight.  
What I fear in it leaves it,  
and fear of it leaves me.  
It sings, and I hear its song.

After days of labor,  
mute in my consternations,  
I hear my song at last,  
and I sing it. As we sing,  
the day turns, the trees move.  
[from Wendell Berry's "Sabbaths"]

So get to the trees where the angels are telling you, "Do not be afraid of your fear." Like Mary, ponder it, for there is much potential for new life in it. And if you can hold on long enough to bring it to full term, I promise you that you will find some fantastic love there.