

Field Notes on Fear

Though the Lord may give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your Teacher will not hide himself any more, but your eyes shall see your Teacher.

Isaiah 30:20

My body went for a walk but my mind was like a crazed squirrel jumping from branch to branch of worries and fears. My body ambled along the glorious shores of Lake Superior. My mind, though, tripped over the jagged rocks of this illness and whether I can possibly be strong enough for this work that has chosen me. If my brain had hands, it would have been wringing them over what God wants of my weakness. This hurricane of medical worries, notes for upcoming sermons, dates, Bible passages, ideas for my blog, and confusion touched down like three pounds of wet clay in my belly. It's hard to get clear when you are afraid.

People sometimes comment on how “courageous” I’ve been over the past months of surgeries, radiation treatments, and more recent health setbacks. That cracks me up. I have pretty much been experimenting full-time with fear (against my will, I might add). I’m trying to attend to the Teacher on our behalf. Here are some recent things I’ve learned.

Tell the truth about fear. Talk about it with people who can listen. The other day Eli, my doctor and friend, called to see how I was doing. I said I was feeling quite tired and still had an uneasy lump in my stomach. He said, "That lump makes me wonder if you are feeling anxious." I said, "Yes, I am. I've been worrying about things." We talked a little about those worries. The feeling in my stomach lifted almost instantly. Maybe if we talked more honestly about our fears they would have less power over us.

Be in the moment as much as you can. Fears are always about what lies ahead. My walking mantra is "Be still and know that I am God." It helps to settle my anxious heart and lets me savour a little of the beauty of the present. How much love and money are not risked, how many dreams and visions are stifled, because we are paralyzed by fears about what might lie ahead?

Stay connected—with God, community, and self. Here are some things that have been healing and encouraging for me over the past weeks: Pet your dog if you have one. Go to church, and stay for the potluck if they have one. Let people bring you Jell-O and custard and soup. Pray. Visit with your neighbours. Ask them how their lives are going, and listen. Call your church and tell them you need a pastoral visit. Go for walks with friends. Nap if you're tired. Read the Bible. In the evening, sit on opposite ends of the couch from your beloved so you can hold each other's feet while you talk. At the table, hold hands and read a prayer from your favourite prayer book. Phone people who make you laugh or cry.

Finally, remember that you are not your fear. Fear is part of you. It is an emotion you have, but it does not have to have you. You are more than your fears. So much more. You are beloved. You can be faithful and afraid at the same time, but you have to choose—sometimes from moment to moment—between those incompatible masters and allow faith to shape you.

I am choosing to be faithful—to trust the promises of scripture, the gospel of Jesus crucified and risen, the fidelity of the One Love, and the Mystery that continues to pursue us all.