

Fear

Today I want to talk about being afraid.

We all feel afraid sometimes, and some people feel afraid a lot of the time.

Different people are afraid of different things, and as we grow up, the things we are afraid of, change.

When we are afraid, we look for support and comfort from other people. As children we turn to our parents, older brothers and sisters and other key people in our lives. As we get older, we turn to friends, partners, people who we feel have more experience than ourselves. Sometimes we face our fears and conquer them, sometimes they take control of us and affect what we do and how we do it.

There is a story called “We’re going on a bear hunt” which is all about being afraid and we’re going to read it together this morning.

Open powerpoint

This is the chorus and we’re all going to say it each time it appears. Let’s have a practise.

Page 2, 3 We will take it in turn to read the verses; each verse has two pages. Let’s practise that.

In between I’m going to talk about our fears and see how God can help us to overcome them.

Begin with 1st chorus and verse

In the story, most of the frightening things are environmental, they are found in the natural world around us. These are the fears that very young children experience. How many of you were once scared of thunderstorms, the dark or dogs. As a child, I always had a light on through the night and I still don’t like the dark very much.

Peter and the disciples suffered at the hands of nature when they were out fishing on the Sea of Galilee. They were used to storms as they fished, but one night they battled against the wind all night, trying to get back to the shore. St Matthew tells us how Jesus came to the disciples, walking on the water. They were all terrified but Peter was brave enough to walk across the water to Jesus, focussing completely on him and ignoring the storm all around him. But as the wind blew even stronger he lost his focus on Jesus, became afraid again and began to sink. Even then, Jesus came to Peter, gave him his hand and helped him back into the boat.

Helen Keller was born deaf, dumb and blind. With the aid of a remarkable teacher, she learned to speak and to live in a seeing, hearing world. She said, “*I’m not **afraid** of storms, for I am learning how to sail my ship.*”

We all have ships to sail, and as we learn to sail, we learn to take on more challenging weather and conditions, so that we move from being novices to being more experienced, mature sailors. We learn how to sail from other people who are more experienced than us. If we are always afraid of the storms, we will be very limited in when and where we can sail; our lives and experiences will be much more limited and we cannot enjoy all that God wants to give us.

We often talk about keeping our eye on the ball, which I expect is a football image; well I think God could be a ball, because we all need to keep our eye on him, especially when we are afraid. When we do lose our focus, God will not give up on us; he'll help us to try again. Every day is a new beginning with God.

John Paul Jones said, "*If **fear** is cultivated, it will become stronger. If faith is cultivated, it will achieve mastery.*"

It is very difficult to stay focussed on God when we are afraid, because unlike Peter, we do not have God physically there in front of us but if we ask God to be with us before we go into a fearful situation, it can help us to remember that He is always with us and will help us if we ask Him to. Faith often starts small and grows with time and care. God has the time and will give us the care to enable our faith to grow, if we want it to. We can master the fear when we really believe that God is on our side.

So remember, when we cannot see where we are going because the grass is taller than we are, God can see over it and will guide us if we trust Him.

2nd chorus and verse.

As we get older, we often have imaginary fears, of ghosts and monsters. How many of us used to watch Dr Who from behind the sofa. Even our fearless teenagers will only watch certain scary films with someone else for support.

As adults it is easy to believe everything we read in the paper or see on TV, but how much of the spin put on news stories is valid and how much could be described as imaginary.

All through our lives we can become fearful of imaginary obstacles.

The children of Israel had to rely on information about the land of Canaan from the twelve men who went in to spy out the land. Although the land was fertile and an excellent place to live, there were some problems in the shape of many other tribes who would fight them for occupation. Ten of the twelve spies put such a negative spin on their experiences that the people were convinced and were filled with imaginary fears. They persisted in this view even though Joshua and Caleb said, "*We saw the land ourselves and it's very good. If we obey the Lord, he will surely give us that land rich with milk and honey. So don't rebel. We have no reason to be afraid of the people that live there. The Lord is on our side, and they won't stand a chance against us!*"

But the people chose to remain filled with fear, which cost them the rest of their lives as they were kept out of the Promised Land. Only Joshua and Caleb eventually entered Canaan forty years later.

People are often afraid of new things. It is interesting that when cars were new, fear of them was such that for a time the law required a man with a red flag to walk in front of it to warn the public; today, tens of thousands die in road accidents each year yet governments struggle to instill a real fear of [drunk driving](#) or [speeding](#).

People are also afraid of things they don't understand and this fear can often lead to hate. Cyril Connelly said, "Hate is the consequence of **fear**; we **fear** something before we hate it; a child who **fears** noises becomes a man who hates noise." Ignorance and fear can lead us to hate people as well as things. If we try to understand the things we are afraid of, we can often lose the fear in the process.

An internet search found 74 appearances of the phrase, "don't be afraid". Most of them appear in the Old Testament, when, like us, the people did not have a physical living God with them. We should be encouraged that there are so many of them, saying things like:

Don't be afraid or ashamed and don't be discouraged. You won't be disappointed.

*I promise to be with you and keep you safe, so **don't be afraid.**"*

*Even the hairs on your head are counted. So **don't be afraid!** You are worth much more than many sparrows.*

*I am the LORD your God. I am holding your hand, so **don't be afraid.** I am here to help you.*

*You won't even have to fight. Just take your positions and watch the LORD rescue you from your enemy. **Don't be afraid.** Just do as you're told. And as you march out tomorrow, the LORD will be there with you.*

Over and over, the Bible tells us that God is there for us and we don't need to be afraid. We need to hang on to these words and remember them when we are scared. Even when the water is deep and cold, and the current is strong, God will keep us safe if we trust Him.

3rd chorus and verse.

Older children, teenagers and adults can suffer with social fears, such as making friends at a new school or office, having to give a speech in public, meeting your partner's boss or girlfriend's mother for the first time.

Moses was very frightened when God told him he was the one to challenge Pharaoh to let the Israelites go. At first Moses said he wasn't important enough for this mission. When God reassured him, Moses wanted to know what name to give God when the people asked. God told him that his name was Yahweh – I am. Moses then asked what he should do if no-one believed that he had spoken to God. God showed his power to Moses by enabling him to turn a stick into a snake, and said he should do this or the people to convince them of God's power. But Moses was still afraid because he found it difficult to speak clearly in public. So God made it easier for Moses by letting him work with his brother Aaron, who was a better speaker. After this Moses trusted God more and always followed his instructions. When we have real difficulties in carrying out God's plan, He will take us seriously and give us someone to help us. When children play 'stuck in the mud' in the playground, they have to be freed by someone else when they are stuck. We can all help others when they are afraid; offer them support, let them know we care, show God's love through ours.

With the support of his brother, Moses became more confident and learned to overcome his fear of public speaking. We can overcome our fears if we persevere.

David Lloyd George said, "***Don't be afraid*** to take a big step. You can't cross a chasm in two small jumps." When we trust God, we can face the biggest chasm with confidence, because he can lift us out of the mud, to be strong like eagles soaring upward on wings. Despite the mud, we will walk and run without getting tired.

4th chorus and verse.

The young people I work with often come with experiences of failing. They cannot manage to complete their work, they find it too difficult and by the time they reach our Centre they are afraid to try, because their experience tells them that they will fail again. They have very little confidence in their abilities and it can take a long time before they begin to discover that they can succeed.

Many people, both young and old, can find themselves in situations when they are afraid because they do not feel up to the job they have to do. We can all feel lost in a big dark wood, with lots of tree roots to trip us up.

Gideon was the baby of his family. He had never shouldered responsibility because he had not needed to; there were always older brothers to do the job. His family were not important, they did not play a leading role in their community, they just got on with the every day tasks of providing for themselves. This task was becoming increasingly difficult because of the Midianites.

The Bible tells us, *“They rode in on their camels, set up their tents, and then let their livestock eat the crops as far as the town of Gaza. The Midianites stole food, sheep, cattle and donkeys. Like a swarm of locusts, they could not be counted and they ruined the land wherever they went.*

One day Gideon was threshing corn for his mum to grind and make bread with. He had to do it in a hidden place, so the Midianites wouldn't see him and take the corn. An angel came to him and said, *“The Lord is helping you and you are a strong warrior!”*

You can imagine Gideon tuning to see who the angel could be talking to, because that certainly wasn't a description of him. When he realised it was him, at first he considered the part about the Lord helping them. With all the problems they were facing, it didn't feel as though the Lord was doing anything to help them. But the angel said he meant the Lord was going to help them because he would give Gideon the power to rescue them from the hands of the Midianites.

“Bu bu but I can't do that,” stammered Gideon. “I'm nobody, I come from a family of nobodys. Surely you want one of my brothers. You've made a mistake, you've got the wrong man.”

We all have that feeling of not being up to the task, of being inadequate, of being afraid to try in case it goes wrong and we look stupid. In Gideon's case, if it went wrong he wouldn't just look stupid, he'd be dead!

“Gideon,” the Lord answered, “you can rescue Israel because I am going to help you! Defeating the Midianites will be as easy as beating up one man.”

Gideon was very polite, but he wasn't accepting this challenge without some more proof. He went off and prepared a sacrifice for God. This took some time but God just waited patiently for Gideon to return. God's angel touched the prepared sacrifice with his stick and it instantly burst into flames, and burned without Gideon doing anything. Now Gideon was really frightened. *“Oh,” he moaned., “Now I'm going to die.”*

“Calm down.” The Lord told Gideon. “There's nothing to be afraid of. You're not going to die.”

Even though God helped Gideon to do some amazing things so that the Israelites would take him seriously, Gideon was still not sure about taking on all the Midianites, so before they went into battle,

“Gideon prayed to God. “I know that you promised to help me rescue Israel, but I need proof. Tonight I'll put some wool on the stone floor of that threshing place over there. If

you really will help me rescue Israel, then tomorrow morning let there be dew on the wool, but let the stone floor be dry.” And that’s just what happened. Early the next morning, Gideon got up and checked the wool. He squeezed out enough water to fill a bowl. But Gideon prayed to God again. “Don’t be angry with me,” Gideon said. “Let me try this just one more time, so I’ll really be sure you’ll help me. Only this time, let the wool be dry and the floor be wet with dew.” That night, God made the stone floor wet with dew, but He kept the wool dry.

Finally Gideon was convinced, and he went on to beat the Midianites. How he did it is a really good story, but we don’t have time for it today. You can find it in Judges chapter 8 if you want to read it yourselves.

I love this story because it shows that with God on our side, we can do anything.

Sandringham school’s motto is ‘Anybody can be Somebody’, and I’m sure that if Gideon could come and speak at a school assembly, his story would prove that beyond doubt.

Remember that God believes in us! He wants us to do great things for him in our lives.

That doesn’t mean we will all become powerful leaders or members of the school council.

But it does mean that we can do so much more if we trust God to help us and guide us through the uneven paths of the forests in our lives.

5th chorus and verse.

Our lives can have snowstorms in them. They do not last forever, but while they are happening we can feel very cold, very alone and very lost.

Another sort of fear is the, “what will people say,” sort. The “I’m afraid to stand out or be different” sort. The sort that responds to peer pressure. We do things that we are not comfortable with because we are scared to say no to our friends, family or work colleagues. We accept the things that others do because we are afraid of the consequences if we speak out against them. Recently an ordinary black lady called Rosa Parks died in America aged 92. Her life was celebrated right across the country, with presidents and ex presidents speaking about her. Why?

Back in the 1950s in America, black people were considered to be less important than white people. There was a rule in Alabama, where Rosa lived, that said that if all the seats on a bus were taken and a white person got on, a black person had to get up and stand so that the white person could sit. Rosa was in her 40s and she was sick of being treated like this. So she refused to give up her seat. For this small act of defiance, she was arrested, charged, found guilty and fined \$10 plus \$4 costs. But all the other black people now had the courage to continue what Rosa had started. They refused to use the buses for 13 months and fought against the law that said black people should not be treated the same as white people. Living in the same town as Rosa was a black minister called Martin Luther King. He was so inspired by Rosa’s action that he went on to spend the rest of his life campaigning for the rights of black people in America and so the lives of millions of people became fairer. Rosa was brave enough to be different, and was willing to face the consequences.

Peter found himself in a difficult situation on the day that Jesus was sentenced to death. Jesus had been arrested and Peter had gone to the courtyard of the High Priest’s house to see what he could find out. Peter was still there when it was known that Jesus had been sentenced to death. Someone recognised him as being one of Jesus’ friends and said so, but Peter said he was nothing to do with Jesus. This happened three times, and after the third time, he realised that Jesus had told him this would happen. Jesus had called Peter a

rock and said that the church would be founded by him, and yet he knew that Peter would be too afraid to acknowledge him at that dangerous time. God knows that we are afraid, that we make mistakes, that we let him down, but it does not matter to him. He always gives us another chance. Once Peter saw the resurrected Christ, and later received the power of the Holy Spirit, he became much braver. Tradition says that Peter eventually moved to Rome with his wife, where he preached the good news of Jesus all the time. This infuriated the emperor Nero, had him crucified upside down, after having watched his wife die first. No longer was Peter afraid to be different.

When we are fighting our way through our snowstorms, God can guide us if we trust in Him. My brother has a satellite navigation system in his car, and if he goes the wrong way, a patient voice tells him a new route to get him back on course. No matter how many wrong turnings he takes, the patient voice goes on finding him a new route that will take him to his final destination. God is the ultimate sat nav in our lives. He will always be patient, never give up on us, and is the only one who can guide us safely through the snowstorms of our lives.

6th chorus and verse

Caves can be scary places because they are dark and you don't know what's in them. In this case the bear is the thing the children have been trying to find, but when they find it, they are more scared than they have been so far. Sometimes when we get the thing we really think we want, we discover that it isn't what we actually want at all. We need our sat nave to redirect us.

But at other times, caves can be a place of safety, where we can rest and recover from the difficulties of the journey.

Elijah was a prophet who lived in very stormy times. He lived over 3000 years ago, and spent his life telling the king, Ahab, that he was not doing what God wanted. Ahab was one of a run of bad kings that Israel had at that time. He married Jezebel, the daughter of a pagan king, and actively encouraged the people to worship Baal, Jezebel's god. Elijah's job was to give Ahab God's message that this was wrong.

During his time of ministry, he had to keep hiding to stay safe. God sent ravens with food for him and he hid near a stream so he could drink the water. When a drought came and the stream dried up, God sent him to hide with a widow. God then enabled Elijah to challenge Ahab to a contest between God and Baal. You can find out about the contest in 1 Kings chapter 18. Needless to say, God won and Jezebel was very angry.

She sent a message to Elijah: "You killed my prophets. Now I'm going to kill you! I pray that the gods will punish me even more severely if I don't do it by this time tomorrow."

Elijah was afraid when he got her message, and he ran to the town of Beersheba in Judah. He left his servant there, then walked another whole day into the desert. Finally he came to a large bush and sat down in its shade. He begged the Lord, "I've had enough. Just let me die! I'm no better off than my ancestors." Then he lay down in the shade and went to sleep. Suddenly an angel woke him up and said, "Get up and eat." Elijah looked around and by his head was a jar of water and some baked bread. He sat up, ate and drank, then lay down and went back to sleep. Soon the Lord's angel woke him again and said, "Get up and eat or else you'll get too tired to travel." So Elijah sat up and ate and drank. The food and water made him strong enough to walk forty more days. At last he reached Mount Sinai, the mountain of God, and he spent the night there in a cave.

While Elijah was on Mount Sinai, the Lord asked, Elijah, why are you here?"

He answered, "Lord God all powerful, I've always done my best to obey you. But your people have broken their solemn promise to you. They have torn down your altars and killed all your prophets except me. And now they are even trying to kill me!"

"Go out and stand on the mountain," the Lord replied. "I want you to see me when I pass by."

All at once a strong wind shook the mountain and shattered the rocks. But the Lord was not in the wind. Next there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake.

Then there was a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire.

Finally there was a gentle breeze, and when Elijah heard it, he covered his face with his coat. He went out and stood at the entrance to the cave.

I love this story because it shows how gentle God is when we are struggling to remain faithful to Him. We know that he is all powerful, as Elijah calls him, and he could have appeared in the wind or the earthquake or the fire. But when he deals with us he is as gentle as the caress of a soft breeze on our cheek. We do not need to be afraid of him. He will always be gentle with us and show us where we can be safe.

7th chorus and verse

Our fears are relative to our previous experiences. Fear of the bear was greater than fear of all the difficulties of the journey. The children tore back to the safety of their home. Do you remember the story of the Wizard of Oz. Dorothy left home because she was afraid that Toto would be taken away if she didn't. But when she thought Aunt Em might be ill, her concern for her aunt was greater, and she went home.

Other people with more experience can often give us the reassurance we need when we are afraid and that is why it is so important to share our fears with someone else that we can trust.

Sometimes we are right to be afraid. Fear is an emotion that can be good, when it alerts us to danger and gets us away from harmful situations. Experience, both our own and that of other people, helps us to decide when we should stay and face the fear and fight it, and when we should run away. When faced with a real live bear, the children realise that this is very dangerous and they run home as fast as their legs will carry them. And what do they learn from their experience?

Final 2 slides.