

If you have a bald head, and don't want to go through any of the currently available methods for reforestation -- typically summed up as "drugs, rugs or plugs" -- you may be better off simply to embrace your baldness. That's what John Capps did before he passed away last year on January 27<sup>th</sup>, 2022. Capps, who's has been described as someone "who could pass as a stunt-double for an over-the-hill Mr. Clean," was the founder of Bald Headed Men of America, an organization whose members have sprouted from 50 states and 39 countries. That organization holds a convention every September in -- where else? -- *Morehead*, North Carolina. The three-day event features clinics on bald-head care and awards for the Sexiest Bald Head, the Most Improved Bald Head, the Most Distinguished Bald Head and so on.

In our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus says that the "hairs of your head are all counted." Granted, counting the hairs on some heads is a less time-consuming job than counting the hairs on some other heads. And, let's face it, Jesus wasn't trying to be funny with his comments. He was talking quite seriously about the reality that those who participated in his mission would likely be recipients of the hostility and rejection he experienced. In fact, some of the leaders of that society had already branded Jesus as Beelzebub or Satan, so "how much more will they malign those" who work with him, Jesus said.

But Jesus then told his followers not to fear; in fact, he tells them this at least three times in today's story. And they are not to fear because **God's purposes are revealed**. They should not fear because **God has control of the future**. And they should not fear because **God also has control of the present**.

In reality, though, isn't "not fearing" more easily said than done? FDR famously declared, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself," but who among us can turn fear off when it has us in its grip? And it matters not whether what we fear is terrorism, illness, bad things befalling our children, or the collapse of our

retirement savings. During the last recession, one of the call-in news shows had a woman on the line who said that the dive in the stock market and the beating her retirement funds had taken had her *literally* trembling with fear.

Jesus' comments about not fearing come in the context of his sending his disciples out to preach in the towns and villages of Galilee. At the same time, he warned them of coming persecutions, saying, "See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; ... Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me ..." Because of our own experiences with fear, we can imagine something of the dread the disciples must have felt as Jesus dispatched them, especially as he went on to speak of the threats and dangers they could expect to encounter such as: arrests, floggings, hatred, betrayal and other forms of persecution.

But then he told his disciples not to fear any of these things. He said, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell." Those words state an entirely different perspective on fear from the one that usually haunts us. Jesus isn't saying that all we have to fear is fear itself, but rather to "fear that which is truly deadly." He's talking about what truly matters, and about the importance of taking the long view: "The worst that other people or troublesome circumstances can do to us, is still not as bad as suffering a spiritual death. God, and not anyone or anything else," he says in so many words, "holds our ultimate destiny in his hands. In the final analysis, only two events can befall his followers -- life and death -- and both are in the hands of God."

Okay, we understand Jesus' point, but we don't live in the long view. We live day by day, and, from that vantage, there's a lot of scary stuff. When confronted by a threat, who among us can sit back and say, "Oh well, whatever harm this

situation can cause me, it cannot destroy my soul." No, we see the threat to our immediate circumstances, our fear is in the present tense and it's not unreasonable. In fact, for most of us, having a fear of *something* is unavoidable.

It's an involuntary response to a threat. It can even be a positive thing, for, in the case of an immediate threat, fear often leads us to respond with either fight or flight, one of which may well be the appropriate and even saving reaction. There have even been studies that report that realistic fear appears to be healthy for a person. Moderate levels of fear, for example, have been associated with better adjustment to surgery than low or high fear levels.

But fear can also paralyze us and cause us to panic and react in ways that make things worse. Or we just don't think straight. Comedian Jerry Seinfeld refers to the irrational way we address our phobias: "According to most studies, people's number one fear is public speaking. Number two is death. Death is number two. Does that sound right? This means to the average person, if you go to a funeral, you're better off in the casket than doing the eulogy."

Jesus' instructions to his disciples, in today's narrative, invite us to let a little heavenly light shine on our earthbound fears. That will not cause us to put all our circumstantially-driven fears behind us, but it can lower the level of terror inherent in the situations that frighten us. And we should distinguish *between being afraid and being fearful*. We have little control over our feelings; they simply are what they are. But we have choices about our attitudes and how we will live. Feeling afraid is a normal response to a perceived threat. But being fearful is an attitude toward life.

A man we'll call Jack used to manage a church camp, which was a popular site for not only summer children's programs, but also for church retreats the rest of the year. The camp was situated in a heavily wooded site, and the main lodge sat a considerable distance from the house where Jack lived. To keep expenses down,

the camp did not keep the lodge lit and heated, except when it was in use. In winter, with the early dark, Jack often had to walk over to the lodge in darkness to turn the lights on, and the heat up, in preparation for a church group to arrive.

Most of the time, Jack was already busy somewhere else in the camp when it came time to turn the lights and heat on, and he didn't want to take the time to go home and get a flashlight. So, he would walk to the lodge, by whatever moonlight there was available. Jack says that when he arrived at the dark lodge and was ready to open the door, there was always a moment of uneasiness. The lodge was not kept locked, and it was always possible that someone was inside, up to no good. That thought always crossed his mind, and it was a realistic possibility. But always, after recognizing the fear, Jack told himself that such a scenario was very unlikely, and that he'd never had any trouble before. He'd open the door, reach around to the light switch and turn the hallway light on.

For Jack, at least, that fear was real, but his decision to go into the lodge anyway meant that he was choosing not to act fearfully. One time, a friend who knew Jack opened the lodge in the dark asked him what would cause him to panic. Jack considered the question and then said that if, when he opened the door and reached for the switch, he found a hand already on it, he'd panic.

When it comes to fear, there's always some choice in how we react. In our gospel reading, Jesus requires his followers to face their fear, even at its possible worst, and to proceed in the right direction anyway. That has applications for us even in the face of problems forced on us.

Preacher John Killinger tells of a man who was a gunner in the nose bubble of a B-17 airplane during World War II. The man was in that part of the plane as the pilot was landing on a narrow strip of jungle. Suddenly, the gunner saw that there was a ditch across the runway. "I knew it was curtains," he said. "I tried to warn the pilot, but I couldn't speak fast enough. When I finally switched on the

intercom, I knew the pilot had seen it. He was praying 'God, don't let me panic, don't let me panic.'" Somehow, the pilot managed to bounce the plane on the ground and into the air again, leaping the ditch. The gunner says that he has often thought of that prayer and prayed it himself in the years since. He prayed not for anything tangible, but just not to panic.

We who follow Jesus should also remind ourselves that the things we fear are never the final word on our lives. That's what Jesus was telling the disciples as he sent them out into dangerous situations. We can imagine several of them praying a similar prayer: "God, don't let me panic," and it must have been answered, because they all went forward. Jesus assured them that God, whose eyes were on even the sparrow, who knew even the number of hairs on their heads, would not desert them.

The same is true for all of us who walk with Jesus. Nothing can separate us from the love of God, not even fear itself, and not even the frightening things that actually happen to us. In fact, you might even say that there's no coming over that fact. After all, God promises to always be with us, so there really is no reason for us to be afraid. And thanks be to God for that! Amen!