living in fear

Steve Matthews

Session for use with devozine meditations for April 22–30, 2013.

MAKING THE CONNECTION
“As a child, I lived in a house surrounded by tall white pine trees. The needles on the trees would whistle and sometimes roar when the wind blew through my neighborhood. I believe that my earliest fear was that the trees would come crashing down on my room. I remember praying for safety on windswept nights.

“Fear is not a pleasant emotion. It makes us uncomfortable, physically and emotionally. Even so, fear is not a bad emotion. It is perhaps our most primal and most helpful emotion. Fear heightens our awareness of threats, which can be the stimulus we need to seek safer surroundings. Unfortunately, our culture seems to focus on what makes us fearful. We are inundated with stories that tell us to expect violence, scarcity, and hardship. Don’t get me wrong; Sandy Hook violence and political posturing about fiscal cliffs and global warming are real, and they are contrary to the peaceable kingdom God envisions. But not every rustling bush hides a tiger waiting to pounce, not every politician is crooked, and not every whirling pine tree will fall.

“We will be afraid. Fear is natural. But God envisions a life of abundance for us, despite the threats we face. How then do we proceed? Where is God as we step into an uncertain and sometimes threatening future?” —Steve

MEET THE WRITER
Steve Matthews was a youth minister for more than fifteen years. At present, he is living on a small farm in central Virginia with a cat, a dog, and sixteen chickens. He loves growing his own food, as well as cooking and eating it. Steve is working as a spiritual director and a consultant in the area of “Contemplative Approaches to Ministry.” He was also a writer for The Way of Pilgrimage: An Adventure in Spiritual Formation for the Next Generation.

STUFF YOU WILL NEED
• Bibles or copies of Psalm 23
• pens and paper
• art supplies
• a computer with Internet access
• copies of the “Closing Prayer”
• a large sheet of paper or newsprint on which you have written this quotation: “Life is either a daring adventure or nothing at all.” —Helen Keller, The Open Door

• markers
• newsprint

PLUGGED IN
+ Our culture has been conditioned for anxiety and fear; but in order to keep our souls alive, we need to be open to experiencing the fullness of life. While we certainly want to use common sense to protect ourselves, we will inevitably experience pain and loss. In this TED talk video, “The Price of Invulnerability,” Brené Brown teaches us that if we numb ourselves to pain, we become unable to experience the fullness of love and joy. This video might be a bit heady for your youth group (although Brown is a great story teller), but it could provide you with valuable information for this lesson. (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_UoMXF73j0c)

+ The song “Fear is Easy, Love is Hard,” by Jason Gray, is a great option for this lesson. It presents a poignant choice: Will we be motivated by fear, or will we move forward in love? (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yn0RHh3BQT4)

CHECKING IN
Begin this time with an opening ritual: a moment of silence, a short prayer that the group says together, or the lighting of a candle to symbolize Christ’s presence. Take a moment to claim the space and time as holy.

Then invite group members to reflect on the questions below, encouraging them to listen prayerfully to one another without comment.

Some animal researchers say that most species, including humans, have a fear response to threatening situations. Most of the time, the response falls into one of three categories: fight, flight, or freeze. In the past few weeks, when have you seen an animal or another person respond to a fearful situation? Which of the three reactions did they choose?

When have you felt afraid or threatened? How did you respond to the threat?

EXPLORING THE WORD
Scripture: Psalm 23

Fear is a natural response to a threatening situation. Sometimes we forget that we can choose our response. Will we fight, flee, or freeze? Perhaps, we will remember that we have more options. Perhaps we will remember that “God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline” (2 Timothy 1:7, NRSV). We can choose to take a deep breath, to pray for strength and wisdom, and to remind ourselves that God walks with us as we move forward.

Ask the group to read Psalm 23 aloud. Then ask a volunteer to read the psalm aloud a second time. Encourage group members to notice the word or phrase that draws their attention. Provide pens and paper as well as some art supplies. Invite people to spend a few minutes reflecting on the word
or phrase that stands out to them. They may choose to write their reflection or to represent it artistically.

When everyone is finished, invite volunteers to read or show their reflections on the psalm.

Consider asking the group to address some of these questions:

- What is the darkest valley in the world today?
- What are the “rod and staff” that comfort you?
- What friends and relatives would you gather around you to support and encourage you at the dinner to which your enemies are also invited? Who is the host at the dinner? How does the host’s presence change the dynamics at the table?
- Do you believe that “goodness and mercy” are an alternative to “fight, flight, or freeze” in response to fear?
- What does “I shall dwell in the house of the Lord” mean for our lives here and now?

**SHARING IN PRAYER**

Play the video “Fear is Easy, Love is Hard,” by Jason Gray. ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yn0RHb3BQT4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yn0RHb3BQT4))

Then invite group members to read this prayer responsively:

*God, we know that fear is easy and love is hard.*
  *Teach us to choose your love anyway.*
  *When we are scared of the future, show us how to move forward one step at a time.*
  *Teach us to choose your love anyway.*
  *When we feel betrayed and want to give up, keep us from hardening our hearts.*
  *Teach us to choose your love anyway.*
  *When we see someone being mistreated, and we are afraid of ridicule if we support them,*
  *Teach us to choose your love anyway.*
  *When we see violence in our schools and communities, empower us to make a difference together.*
  *Teach us to choose your love anyway.*
  *In the face of fear, help us not to choose revenge, cowardice, or inaction. Instead,*
  *Teach us to choose your love anyway.*
  *In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.*

**TAKING IT FURTHER**

- Point out the quotation by Helen Keller: “Life is either a daring adventure or nothing at all.” Remind the group that Helen Keller was blind and deaf, which often could be frightening. Yet Helen Keller chose to see the possibilities of life.
- Ask group members to identify situations, both in their lives and in the life of the community, in which fear is keeping people from acting in positive, loving ways. Record their responses on large sheets of paper. Is the group drawn to address one of the situations named? Group members may decide to pray for one another or for a community concern, or they may sense clear actions they could take on behalf of others. Whatever step they decide to take, encourage them to do it with a sense of life embracing, loving adventure.

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