



# MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

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## **“Go Where God Is”**

*A Sermon delivered by Rev. Tara Gibbs at Myers Park Baptist Church*

*On August 25, 2024, from Exodus 14:10-16*

What are you afraid of?

That simple question can tell you a lot about a person. Are you like me, where the answer depends on what we mean? By fear, do we mean phobias—uncontrollable, irrational fear or aversion to certain objects or situations? By fear, do we mean rational fears—real, imminent threats of harm, clear and present danger, if you will? By fear, do we mean anticipatory fears—anxiety around the unknown, uncertainty, and what *could* happen? By fear, do we mean conditioned fear—fear learned from past negative experiences and traumas? What are your fears?

I can only imagine the combination of fears that the Israelites experienced in our text as they approached the Red Sea. The first few chapters of Exodus capture the birth narrative of Moses, the captivity of the Israelites by Egypt, and the subsequent exit—or Exodus—out of the land, a deliverance promised by God. Things were going great! Moses was raised up as a deliverer, and miraculous plagues convinced Pharaoh to let the people go out from the bondage of slavery. You’ve seen *The Prince of Egypt*, right? It’s an adaptation of the text, but the general idea is there. Things are looking good for the Israelites, right? Until they reach the Red Sea, and what comes creeping in? FEAR.

In other words, their Spidey senses started tingling, the video game auto-saved, the Jaws music began, and they were waiting for the other shoe to drop. That fear began to loom over them...

Well, what did they have to fear?

As I read this text, this question tickled my spiritual imagination, and I began to wonder: What were their fears? For one, there’s an enormous and unforgiving body of water ahead, with an average depth of about 1,600 feet. I wonder if anyone had a water phobia—aquaphobia or thalassophobia? Or what about people with rational fears? What about those who couldn’t swim, or if they could, their loved ones could not? And what about folks with anticipatory fear? Maybe they find a way across, but then what? What do they do? Where do they go? What will they eat? What about conditioned fear? What if the Egyptians capture them again? They’ve lived in bondage before; what if they oppress them again? Hurt them again? What if it’s worse? One minute, they are singing in celebration of their escape, joyfully gathered in a camp outside Egypt, moved on from the pain and trauma of their past... only to be faced with a new challenge.



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Have you been there?

Feeling like you're making progress, that things are working out, high off the good in life, even if just for a moment... and then the fear creeps in or charges in. Have you felt trapped between actualized fear approaching while faced with unknown fears ahead? Do I leave or stay? Do I say something, or should I remain quiet? Should I end it or keep trying? Should I go for it or hold on a little longer?

Maybe the question isn't, "What are we afraid of?" because there's certainly a lot to fear: spiders, snakes, death; losing a career, loved ones, or a home; test results, election outcomes; being exposed, rejected, or abused; being neglected, abandoned, or forgotten. Maybe the question isn't what we fear that defines us, but how we respond to the fear. Maybe we respond like the Israelites, and our reaction to fear is to question the current direction and long for the past. In verse 11, they ask Moses question after question about this supposed deliverance—questioning how they got here, doubting whether they were going to make it after all, cynically pushing back, begging to be rescued, and then verbally opposing the move forward. Desiring to turn back, falsely claiming that their oppressed past was safer, all because the present is now scary...

But we don't do that, right? We don't hit a bump in the road and then immediately want to give up, right? We don't make an informed decision and then abandon our principles when it gets hard, right? We don't claim to want a new future while longing for a past we know was harmful, right?

OR

Maybe, in our fears, we've gone back to harmful places and relationships. Maybe, in our fears, we've resisted getting help. Maybe, in our fears, we've convinced ourselves we don't need to apologize. Maybe we hit a bump in our career path, so now we jealously judge others in that career. Maybe we felt pushback in our steps toward diversity and inclusion, and we opposed further work. Maybe we recognize that the world is changing faster than we'd like.

Maybe, like the Israelites, nostalgia is a heck of a drug, and in our fear, we long for a false past when everything was "great." But the reality was, it was "great" for a slim minority. Maybe, like the Israelites, we can recognize when our response to fear is to become bitter, angry, jaded, or oppositional and ready to fight—and how it makes the situation worse...

So perhaps it makes sense that some of the very people fighting today are full of anger: the people we see fighting to go back to another time, fighting to keep out people who don't look like them, fighting to keep education and information locked away, fighting to maintain an imbalanced power system, fighting against already marginalized minorities who were never their enemy, and fighting against progress that benefits the majority.



Perhaps they are responding to fear of moving forward by fighting. I'm not saying it's right; I'm saying I understand it.

So, in our fears, is fighting the only option, or is there an alternative? Is there another response to fear besides fighting? Perhaps you're already thinking of the fight-or-flight response. According to Harvard Health, it's the psychological reaction that occurs when a person perceives a threat or fear. This concept of fight or flight is credited to physiologist Walter Bradford Cannon and has been around since 1920ish. Interestingly, recent theorists have expanded it, and it is sometimes known as fight, flight, or freeze.

So, with this concept in mind, maybe our response to fear isn't a fighting one. Maybe it isn't like the Israelites in our text, but more like Moses and **FREEZE**. In the text, Moses says: 1. Don't be afraid, and 2. Stand firm, and watch what God does. He says to put away your fear and freeze. Stop fighting me and stand still. Watch God work it out!

And perhaps that is a good, churchy answer—a good Christian soldier's response to fear. I mean, he is the leader chosen by God, so this must be the response to fear: 1. Stop that very human reaction of fear, and 2. Be still, do nothing, let God (or the universe) work it out. And how many times have we responded to fear the same way? Maybe we, too, have tried to stifle our emotions around fear. Maybe we, too, have derided others for the human experience of fear. Maybe we, too, have seen fear as a weakness and obstacle rather than a mechanism to protect us and a motivator to act.

As opposed to doing nothing... Maybe you've seen it: not a fight response like the Israelites, but a freeze response like Moses. Have you seen this response? Maybe when we want to go for the promotion but never ask. Maybe when we want to do a new thing but never try. Maybe when we know we need to leave but stay anyway. Maybe when we need to speak up but stay quiet. Maybe when we are unsure how to help so we do nothing. Maybe when we get into the weeds and analyze to death, so a decision is never made. Are we frozen in fear? And what good is it?

So, it seems that while the fight response isn't fitting, the freeze response is not very helpful either. Was standing still or freezing moving the Israelites any closer to freedom? Does standing still get us any closer to freedom? Does avoiding accountability move us any closer to unity? Does pushing off climate change as a future concern get us any closer to fixing the issues today? Does calling for a ceasefire while simultaneously claiming the most lethal fighting force get us any closer to peace? Does claiming to not go back but doing business as usual—which got us here in the first place—move us any closer to a new way forward? Does just standing still and watching get us any closer to a beloved community?



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While Moses' intentions are in the right place, perhaps he is off base with this one. Maybe leaders aren't ill-intentioned but also not infallible. So, what do we do with fear? If the fight response can lead to bitterness and uncontrolled anger, and if the freeze response can lead to inaction and indifference, where do we go from here? Again, fear isn't the issue, right? That's a human and biological response. But where do we go from here when all types of fear abound—rational and irrational, present, past, and future? Where do we go from here when the fears of our past are chasing us down? Where do we go from here when the fears of an unknown future lie ahead? Where do we go from here when fear isn't just a phobia or from past experiences, current realities, or future uncertainties? Where do we go when all looks lost, bleak, scary, and absent of the living God?

If the fear response isn't to fight or freeze or to lean into the flight part of the fight-or-flight response, maybe it is to flee. Maybe, sometimes in our fear, we need to flee, run, go—not so much away from fear, but to take flight closer to God. In verse 15, God says to Moses, "Tell the Israelites to move forward, and you stretch out your staff..." Moses said, "Stand still and watch God." God says, "I never said that."

Moses said, "Be still."

God says, "Keep moving forward."

Moses said, "Watch God work."

God says, "Raise up your arm and work with me..."

How often in our fears do we seek to spectate when God is calling us to participate in our own deliverance?

When processing these sermon ideas with a friend, we talked about this being the hard part: that not only are we afraid, but like Moses and the Israelites in their current state, we admitted that in our fear, we are often tired, hungry, and lonely. But here's what Rev. Dr. John also said: He said, like the manna that sustained the Israelites in the wilderness—the small drops of sustenance that the Israelites had to go and collect each day—each day we must find the small glimmers of God and actively collect our daily bread. Even while experiencing systematic oppressions and harsh realities, we have to actively look for and move toward the good in the midst of the bad. We must get closer to what is right when all around us seems wrong. We must take flight, not away from fear, but toward a loving God. Maybe we can recognize that when we are now in the valleys of shadow and death, it does not have to be where we stay. Maybe we can go where God is.

See, I was going to come back to the title eventually. Maybe we can go where God is. When it comes to deliverance from our fears, we can be like the Israelites and agitate or make it worse. We can be like Moses and spectate or get complacent. Or we can go where God is and participate and be active in our own salvation.



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The message for you this morning is first to affirm and validate your fears. They're real; you're allowed to feel fear. But I also want to push you to take flight: move forward, keep on keeping on—not aimlessly or without purpose, but to go where God is. Tell your neighbor, "I've got to go where God is."

In fear, instead of becoming angry and embittered, or indifferent and inactive, do something and go where God is: When you fear rights being taken away, go where folks are organizing and building. When you fear children not having enough to eat, go where people are feeding them. When you fear the privileged and powerful, go where folks are marginalized and learn humility and mutual aid. When you fear being alone, go where folks are fostering community. When you fear going to hell for being queer, go where you are loved and affirmed. When you fear falling down, go where people are holding one another up. You don't have to go back, and you don't have to remain still, but you can go where God is! Like Peter getting out of the boat and going to Jesus, like Lazarus walking up out of the grave, like Queen Vashti leaving the palace with her head held high.

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You can go! And when you go, go where God is. Our fears don't have to leave us enraged or immobilized. Instead, be encouraged and empowered this morning that you can always go where God is.

Amen.