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Proper 28, Year A (1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, Matthew 25:14-30)  
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I invite you, for just a moment, to think about what fear feels like.

What comes to your mind? I'd be willing to bet that, for many of us, we could feel it in our bodies—that lifting and tightening of the shoulder muscles, the breathing that goes fast and shallow. Maybe your mouth got a little dry. Novels tell us that fear will leave a metallic taste. Biology tells us that it will deliver a rush of adrenaline, snapping the world into painfully sharp focus.

Such is immediate fear. But think, a little bit more, about the culture of fear, fear that is not momentary threat but ingrained habit. I suspect most of us have had some experience of that baseline anxiety, as well. What happens to you when not just moment to moment but day to week to month you are frightened? When I lived around Washington, we'd talk about life at Code Orange, knowing that terror might alight, literally, around the corner. I would see a military jet overhead, and I could never decide if I felt better or worse. I learned, like everyone else, to pay attention to abandoned bags on the subway. My shoulder muscles were always tight.

We all want to be secure. And yet we all live, at one time or another, under the wide open skies of vulnerability. Truth be told, I suspect many of us feel like we are living under them now. I turn on the radio on any given day and wonder what bad news I will hear.

I am speaking about fear because I have become convinced it has a lot to do with the gospel this morning. For a long time, I didn't make the connection, because the parable of the talents is supposed to be about stewardship, right? That's how I learned it in Sunday School. It's a subtle validation of capitalism, at the very least, and it's certainly a bulwark of the Protestant work ethic. How convenient, how very literal, that the money being thrown around is labeled in modern translations as "talents"—go, take your aptitude for the fiddle or your knack for languages or whatever and invest for Jesus, capitalists for Christ, end of story.

Except that it's not really the end of the story, or even a very good reading of the middle. If we hear story as financial advice from the gospel, we've missed the point. What's really driving this little morality tale is not money but fear, fear and our response to it. This parable doesn't only ask us what we're going to do with what we have. It asks us, instead, the larger question of how we are going to respond to a threatening world. What do we do when we feel vulnerable? How do we respond when anxiety is our daily companion? How do we live with fear?

If you figure out where this story comes in Matthew's gospel, you'll find that Jesus is giving a lesson to people who really need to answer those questions. He's talking privately with his disciples, and he's made clear to them that there are no easy times ahead. He's talked with them about the end of the world, to be exact, and then he gives them a whole lot of instructions about how they are to prepare themselves to wait for it. Once this story is done, he tells them just one more and then goes off to be betrayed to death.

And so Jesus tells this story, I think, in a way that invites his hearers to put themselves in the place of that third slave. He gets his disciples—he gets us—to think about what it’s going to be like to be afraid all the time. Here’s this guy, who is already judged by the world to be minimally competent, whose ability accords him the least status among all his peers. And now he has the deck stacked against him, because he’s got the smallest margin of error to work with. He’s the only one honest or stupid enough to name what everyone knows—that this absentee master of his is, to put it mildly, a “harsh man.” So that third slave is just sitting there with this great lump of obligation. The Greek *talanta* was not a little coin but a huge thing, 50 or 75 pounds, as dramatic and as overwhelming as a stack of gold bars. It’s like winning the lottery, more money than he’s ever seen in his life. He’s no investment banker; he has no clue what to do with it. And he is terrified.

No wonder the hole in the ground seems so appealing. Because it shouldn’t have any risk, right? Burying money was, in fact, a commonly accepted means of wealth preservation in the ancient world, their equivalent of the safe deposit box of money stuffed in the mattress. It is prudent and wise and surely what all the other slaves are doing. Maybe nothing good will happen, but at least nothing bad will happen. At least his shoulders can relax, for a little while. At least it takes away the fear. Rock and dirt pushed back, out of sight, out of mind. The talent is, safe in its own little grave.

Uh-oh. Does the alarm bell go off somewhere in your head? This is the moment that we should get tipped off: something’s not right here. After all, if we remember the Christian story, we should know enough not to trust holes in the ground. They may seem like safety, but they are not. They may seem like an end to questions, but they are not. Sure, we are sympathetic to this frightened, overwhelmed man, but he’s making one of the oldest mistakes in the book. He’s trying to bury the thing that makes him afraid. In doing so, he’s chosen the tomb.

Jesus would have us choose otherwise. Giving us this example of what *not* to do, he leaves open a whole host of other possibilities. What might be an antidote to fear? What might enable us to break its vise-like grip? Justifying himself to his master, the third slave predicates everything he does on that single emotion: “I was afraid, and so I went and hid your talent in the ground.” How small his world has become, fenced in by his fear. Is there not some way to break out of that little prison?

I do not mean to suggest that any of us can stop experiencing fear. It’s an emotion, like any other, one that grips us whether we like it or not. But I find in this story the suggestion that we can choose whether or not we will let fear motivate us. Will we—can we—perhaps—choose not fear but hope as our guiding star instead?

It’s a complicated process, of course, and most of us can’t just leap in with both feet, ready to risk simply because we want to be ready. And some risks are foolish. I’m not asking you to run and dump all your money back into the stock market because times are going to get better, or anything like that. But if we are to cultivate hope rather than fear, we begin by making deliberate choices about what we believe about ourselves, our God, and our relationship to the world around us. I am asking us all to remember what defines us, to remember who we are, to remember *whose* we are. Children of light, children of day, what happens to us when we spend

so much energy on our fear of the dark? What would change in our lives if we could move past that fear?

The gospel today never spells out how it's possible to live in hope. But Paul's letter to the Thessalonians makes explicit what Jesus has left implicit. We are destined for salvation. Put even more simply, we belong to God. If we can remember that—if we tell ourselves that truth, if we repeat it to one another—no terror can conquer us. All the other realities we might claim about ourselves—that we are overwhelmed, or that we have no idea how to do the job that has been asked of us, that we have made too many mistakes in the past—those realities take second place.

I can't tell you that hope is an easy course, or a painless one. If am to be honest this morning, I will have to remind you about the tense shoulders and the dry mouth and all the rest. I have to tell you to get used to that feeling of fear, because it's not going away. Being Christian doesn't mean that we get immunized against fear. We are all vulnerable in this hurting world, and we will continue to be so.

But I will also ask you to think about another feeling, too—the sensation of hope. Recall what it's like when you find the courage to lift your head when your shoulders are drooping. Remember the breath that finds its way into your lungs even when all the rest of the air has been knocked out. Tell yourself about those times when you have been able to unclench your trembling hands. Tell yourself, and then tell someone else, to give her some courage, too. This is what we do, we Christians. We choose not holes in the ground but stones rolled aside. And those empty graves, those places where we choose to hope and risk, *there* is where life begins for us, thanks be to God.