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Fear Not!

I'm a list maker, and a movie watcher. Right around this time of year these two characteristics converge as I keep an eye out for the "Best Movies of the Year" lists. So it was that last Sunday afternoon I avidly read the entertainment section of the paper and its annual feature of critics' 10 Best lists. Many of the movies listed I will transfer onto my own list of things to watch some day—but there was one movie that I know I will not, because it's a scary movie. Since I was a child I've steered clear of such movies. People say, "It's nothing; it's just a movie." You can tell me that, but it doesn't make the idea of watching it less scary. Of this movie in particular, the reviewer said, "I'm still too freaked out to say much more about it. I'm already clearing out a hiding place under the bed in preparation for the director's next film."

As the critic's comment hints, this particular horror film takes its premise from childhood fears, those fears of something scary emerging from the corners of the house. I'm sure the movie is scary, very scary, because its premise is not just a childhood fear, it's a grown-up fear, that fear of lurking, amorphous, uncontrollable unknowns.

I think, for example, of our grown-up fears for our children. I have these fears, and I hear these fears from other parents, whose children may be very small, or maybe they're in middle schooler like my children now are, or high schoolers, or maybe the children are grown-ups themselves. Seems you never stop being a parent, never stop thinking about the well-being of your child, never stop asking questions about them—and the questions are often tinged with fear: How is the child doing? Growing? Do they have friend, good friends? Are they becoming the person I see they can be, hope they can be? Will they flourish, and be happy, and helpful?

Or, I think about our fears about the work we do, we grown-ups. Seems even though we're adults, we can still find ourselves asking, "What do I want to be when I grow-up?" We survey where we are, and then we ask, "Will it last?" Or, "Will we last in it?" Or we'll ask this fearful question: "Is our work making any difference?"

Or, I think about fears for our well-being. Can we continue to live like this? Are we financially healthy? Or what about our physical health, our mental health, our relational health?

These are the fears of an unknown and unknowable future. They're the fears of the outcomes of our decisions, choices about which we are uncertain, made in situations in which we have at best limited influence. They're the fears of something we can't quite see or touch, but that still looks and feels ominous.

These are scary things for adults. They're not just things that go bump in the night.

But, if you can remember being scared as a child, or if you've ever comforted a scared child, you know what it is that finally casts out fear. In the silence of midnight and darkened rooms, sounds are magnified and distorted, objects take on strange shapes. The child cries out: "I'm afraid."

The sleepy parent replies, "It's nothing. Go back to sleep."

I've tried that. I've tried just telling a child that, but I've never found it to work, just saying that. There has to be something else said, something else done, along with the telling. Children cannot be simply talked out of fear.

Neither can adults. No matter how much we try to eradicate our fear with explanation or rationalization; no matter how we try to eliminate terror by taking it apart, analyzing it, or even

by attacking it, fear is not abolished by someone telling us it's nothing, or by us trying to violently make it into nothing. That doesn't make fear go away.

That's not how God makes fear go away.

God doesn't just tell us, "It's nothing." God doesn't give quick answers to all our anxious questions. In fact, in various instances in the Bible, when pressed to say more, Jesus himself can seem frustratingly un-explanatory. And there is much about Jesus that cannot be rationalized.

A child can tell us why this is. As any scared child knows, and as Christian faith holds, there is only one thing that casts out fear. God's word says, "Perfect love casts out fear." God's love is perfected in Jesus. God knows we cannot be talked out of our fears. We can only be loved out of them. God knows, and God shows, God's perfect love for us in Jesus, in a person, in real presence. Like a parent to a frightened child, in Jesus, God comes into the room with us. In Jesus, God hears our cries, and enters our darkness, takes a seat, right next to us on the side of the bed. Instead of explanation, in Jesus, God straightens out the covers, and says, "Do not be afraid," and "I am with you." In our midnight fear, God smooths our brows, reminds us of our baptism, "I have called you by name." God says, "I love you. I will come when you call. You can follow me through the longest, darkest night, and into endless day."