

Things that go bump in the night

Isaiah 46:1-13

October 29, 2006

In honor of Halloween, I offer this prayer:

*From ghoulies and ghosties
And long-leggedy beasties
And things that go bump in the night,
Good Lord, deliver us!*

It's an old Scottish prayer, but to it we can add our own prayers:

*Deliver us, Lord, from things that make the hairs on the back of our necks
stand up.*

*Deliver us, Lord, from things that make our skin crawl and our spines
tingle, from things that take away our breath and make our hearts race ...
from things that leave us limp and trembling and hesitant and afraid.*

What are you afraid of? Of ghoulies and ghosties and things that go bump in the night? Of snakes or spiders or bears or cats? Are you afraid of heights? Afraid of water? Afraid of the dark? Are you afraid of being alone? Are you afraid of crowds?

Are you afraid of pushy people or angry people or people who are very different from you? Are you afraid of Muslims or Hispanics or young black men? Are you afraid of being robbed? Are you afraid of being raped? Are you afraid of being targeted in a terrorist attack?

Are you afraid of failing? Afraid of making a mistake? Afraid of wasting your life? Are you afraid of rejection? Of humiliation? Of being disliked? Of being unloved? Are you afraid of being unimportant, unappreciated, unneeded, unwanted?

Are you afraid of losing control? Are you afraid of your own anger, your own emotions, your own lack of self-control?

Are you afraid of death? Or, if you are not afraid of death itself, are you afraid of dying? Are you afraid of dying too soon? Are you afraid of dying too late? Are you afraid of losing your soul?

What are you afraid of? We have many fears and fear is a powerful enemy.

Fear debilitates. When we are afraid, we become almost paralyzed, unable to do what we usually can do. We have difficulty taking action, except to run away. We have difficulty making decisions, except the decision to do nothing, to take no risks.

Fear distracts. When we are afraid, fear fills our minds and hearts, leaving little room for anything else. The things that really matter to us, the people that really matter to us, are pushed aside and forgotten.

Fear distorts. When we are afraid, we see the world through a cracked and clouded lens. Fear skews our judgments, bends our choices, and subverts our values. When we are afraid, we do things to protect ourselves that we would never think of doing otherwise.

Fear distances. When we are afraid, we retreat, we hide, we cover up, we build walls. We do not initiate any new relationships, and we pull back from relationships we already have.

Fear is a powerful enemy: debilitating, distracting, distorting, distancing. Fear is a powerful enemy of life.

So what can we do to defeat this enemy? What can we do to overcome our fear? What is the antidote to fear?

Is it knowledge? Are we frightened by what we do not understand, by what is unfamiliar or unknown or unnamed? Is knowledge power? Does naming the enemy, knowing the enemy, becoming familiar with the enemy, make the enemy any less threatening? Or more so?

Does it ease your fears to learn more about the life-threatening illness that has invaded your body, about the risks, the treatment, the prognosis? Or does that only intensify the fear?

Does it calm your fears to learn more about the identity and motivation and methods of those who wage a war of terrorism against you and people like you, or does knowing too much just make it worse?

Is technology the antidote to fear? Are we frightened by the threat to which we have no answer, no defense? Can we overcome our fear by finding or manufacturing the drug that works, the tool that works, the weapon that works, the security system that works, the diet that works, the self-help program that works to defeat our enemies?

Maybe. But it seems that whenever we find a way to stop this threat at this time and this place, it finds a way around or under or over our defenses, or another new threat comes along to take its place. What can a 700-mile fence or airport screeners or a new generation of smart missiles do to allay our fears? And no technology is able to address our deepest fears: fear of death, fear of not mattering, fear of losing our souls.

Is power the antidote to fear? Is overcoming our fears a matter of getting on the right side or getting the right people on our side, a matter of becoming the biggest and the baddest and the best? Once we are strong enough, smart enough, successful enough, will our fears disappear? Will we finally feel secure?

Maybe, for a while. But power and success are fleeting illusions. Today's champion is tomorrow's also-ran. There will always be somebody smarter, stronger, faster coming along to take your place.

One day Bel and Nebo were worshiped -- the Babylonian Zeus, the Babylonian Apollo -- symbols of the power and glory of wisdom of Babylon, but the next day they were no more than a load on the back of a tired donkey!

One day Saddam ruled an entire nation, Babylon's descendant, with a iron fist, bringing consternation and frustration and indignation to an entire world, but the next day he was hiding in a hole in the ground, and the next people were pawing through his hair looking for head lice.

The lesson of history is this: power is fleeting and security is an illusion. Every powerful person, every powerful institution, every powerful empire, is always

supplanted by the next. The ambitions of Egypt and Babylon and Persia and Greece and Rome and Spain and Germany and the Soviet Union all came to an inglorious end.

That should be a cautionary tale to be heeded by any who would look to this nation, this world-dominating power, to provide lasting comfort and genuine security and true freedom from fear. The worship of any man or woman or institution or nation, which means to put ultimate trust in any man or woman or institution or nation, is idolatry. And as the scripture says, idols cannot even save themselves, so why should we expect them to be able to save us?

If neither knowledge nor technology nor power is an antidote to fear, then what is?

*I am your God ...
I have cared for you from the time you were born and I will take care of you
until you are old and your hair is gray ...
I will give you help ...
I will rescue you ...*

Either this is true and we have finally found the one place to lay our fears to rest, or it is not and fear will literally be the death of us.

Love is the antidote to fear. God's love is the antidote to fear. *Perfect love drives out all fear! Perfect love drives out all fear!* Think about it! Think about what it means! It is love that drives out fear, not knowledge, not technology, not power, but love!

Think of your fears. Think of what perfect love could do with your fears ...

You are afraid of being pointless, of living a life that won't have really mattered, of coming into life and passing out of life barely making a ripple on the surface of human history, quick to pass away, quick to be forgotten, but the Lord says: *I love you, I know you, I remember you ... I made you and you are precious to me ... your life matters to me, so much that I gave what is most precious to me to save you.*

You are afraid of being vulnerable, vulnerable to injury, to disease, to hurt, to loss, but the Lord says: *I love you, I will take care of you ... I made you and I have given you everything you have, I will give you everything you need ... I gave you life and I will give you life.*

You are afraid of death, but the Lord says: *I love you, I will take care of you, I will save you ... I raised Jesus from death and I will raise you, too ... there is nothing in all creation -- no danger, no threat, no fear, not poverty, not loss, not failure, not death -- nothing will ever be able to separate you from my love.*

And so we pray ...

*From ghoulies and ghosties
And long-leggedy beasties
And things that go bump in the night,
Good Lord, deliver us!*

*From sorrow and gloom,
Fearful visions of doom,
From anything that deprives us of joy,
Good Lord, deliver us!*