

The Reality of Fear: Preaching in a Frightened World

Traugott Roser

Abstract

Fear is a recurrent theme in today's popular culture. Film director Steven Spielberg's lifelong work presents the full range from awe and fear to terror, heading towards a deeply humanist approach of overcoming fear. This article puts homiletics into the context of current sociocultural discourse by applying the concept of 'paradigm scenario' (Ronald de Sousa) to fear in media culture and preaching. Preaching, like film, works with emotions such as fear and anxiety, initiating strong physical and mental reaction. To preach within a fearful world demands that one be aware of the psychology of fear. As much as preachers are ready to face their personal fears, they abstain from frightening others. At best, preaching is the art of supporting people to live life liberated by the gospel, speaking up against those who create an atmosphere of fear. The gospel provides numerous paradigm scenarios of courage and vision.

Prologue

In a haunting Episode of the first season of the TV-series, "House of Cards,"¹ US congressman Frank Underwood (Kevin Spacey) delivers a homily of sorts to a devout congregation, inserting all the right phrases and pushing all the right buttons, offering the perfect image of a god-fearing Christian. He encourages the faithful to trust God, love God, even if God's ways are not their ways. In the middle of his sermon he abruptly turns to the camera and talks to us, the all-knowing audience, declaring that what he says has nothing to do with what he truly thinks. His real thoughts would not make for powerful speech. So, he consciously betrays the congregation. Frank Underwood, who will be President, does not care about God, fears neither God nor any sort of punishment for all his pretense about being a devout Christian. This is meant to 'scare the hell out of' anyone watching, for we know that nothing is scarier than a powerful politician who does not shy away from using religious sentiments when it suits him.

¹ House of Cards, Season 1, episode 3 (USA 2013).

My approach to preaching in a frightened world consists of three steps. First, I will turn to sociocultural discourse on fear, introducing the concept of *paradigm scenario* developed by Ronald de Sousa, applying it to fear in the media culture. Second, I will turn to the psychology of fear found in the field I am most familiar with, pastoral care and health care chaplaincy. The third and final part will focus on the experience of the preacher's own fear, leaning upon both Martin Luther and German theologian Otto Haendler.

1. Sociocultural discourse – paradigm scenarios in the movies and in preaching

1.1 Generating fear in the movies

Fear is an emotion that screenwriters, composers of sound and sight, editors, and directors skillfully play with. Suspense and horror movies by Alfred Hitchcock, M. Night Shyamalan and Steven Spielberg, to name but a few of the masters of this genre, have demonstrated how deep emotions can be evoked by technical means. To be frightened by an unnamed monster that dives deep down below the surface until it closes its *jaws* around our imagination, delivers an irresistible thrill to millions of paying viewers. The fascination with the sheer emotion of fear, while securely settled in a recliner, lures millions of people to the theater. Steven Spielberg, director of the movie *Jaws* (1974) later confessed that he drove viewers with an emotional whip to bring them to the point he wanted them to be. His protagonist, police officer Brody (Roy Scheider), living life as a loving middle-class father, is afraid of water. Of course, his fears materialize in a huge great white shark. Brody has to face and confront him and – through self-denial and the willingness to sacrifice – master him.

1.2 Playing with fear in preaching

By diving into the world of Steven Spielberg's cinema, I want to explore the art of playing with fear in the movies, for it is not all that far removed from the art of playing with fear in the history of preaching. Emotions experienced in the darkness of the movie theater have in earlier times been experienced by many Christians sitting in the pew, listening to masterly crafted "*fire and brimstone preaching*." Gregory S. Jackson, scholar in English and American studies at Rutgers University, published an in-depth analysis of evangelical preaching and its contribution to North American culture. His study of preaching during the era of the Great Awakening and subsequent revival movements demonstrates how sensations of fear were manufactured through narrative patterns and lively imagery, which drove congregants toward anxious, yet heartfelt conversion. By the eighteenth century, "Protestant pedagogy reinstated increasingly visually oriented language into

sermons [describing] ‘Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God.’”² Jackson demonstrates how homiletics of this period used a “Hermeneutics of Fear” and followed what he names “Hell’s Plot.”³ The 16th century Reformation had overcome the vivid use of purgatory-images (depicted in detail on the canvases of Dutch painter Hieronymus Bosch) which formerly served as sufficient motivation for people to partake in the Church’s means of salvation. The Reformation turned to the image of the redemptive cross of Christ, abolishing purgatory as such. However, 17th and 18th century preaching returned to using fear, literally scaring the hell out of congregants by painting pictures of hell – this time with words. While purgatory was at least a temporal, finite punishment, hell is eternal. Preachers were so eloquent in describing a personalized hell that imagining being in hell became a psychological experience leading to real action: an immediate submission to the preacher’s rigid morals, omitting any theory-based reflection. Fear, thus, “came to be [...] an important mechanism of conversion in homiletic pedagogies.”⁴ This kind of homiletics has rightfully been called “sensational savagery.”⁵

1.3 A short theory of Spielberg’s and current cinema’s presentation of fear

Let me return to the world of the arts, as homiletics has often done,⁶ order to learn more about the cultural discourse concerning fear. I will concentrate on the art of film.

Steven Spielberg has – since his first films – put the more complex aspects of fear on the silver screen: especially the emotion of awe. I remember the moment when Roy Neary, the leading character played by Richard Dreyfuss, witnesses the advent of a giant spaceship in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (USA 1977/1980). A symphony of light and organ-like sound precedes the moment when a ramp reaches down from above, a flock of celestial beings descends, and the message “do not be afraid” is conveyed into our burning hearts. Actually, the moment of awe is followed by a very short sequence of common (Jewish and Christian) prayer together with a military chaplain. The prayer is: “May God grant us help and safe passage / to show us his path / and lead us in his ways.” Before Roy Neary enters the spaceship to join the friendly aliens, a blessing is spoken by the priest: “May the Lord God give this pilgrim a safe journey.” Strengthened by biblical words of blessing, the audience is ready to indulge in pure awe.

² Gregory S. Jackson, *The Word and its Witness. The Spiritualization of American Realism*, Chicago/London 2008, 29.

³ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁶ Cf. David Buttrick’s (1927–2017) concept of moves & structures: *David Buttrick*, *Homiletic. Moves and Structures*, Philadelphia 1987; and – most influential in Germany – *Martin Nicol/Alexander Deeg*, *Im Wechselschritt zur Kanzel. Praxisbuch Dramaturgische Homiletik*, Göttingen 2013, 20.

Close Encounters, like *Jaws*, came to the theaters in the 1970s, amid an oil crisis, the Cold War, and a deep, frightening economic recession in Western countries. Richard Dreyfuss starred in both movies. What made both his characters so accessible to the audience was that his fear of the unknown – the creature from the depths as well as the being from above – resembled struggles in his and our inner and private life.

Spielberg, always the master of the varieties of ambivalence between fear and awe, played skillfully with basic fears and our longing for awe. Many of Spielberg's movies center on phobias, reaching back to his own childhood experiences. But cinema, for Spielberg, has always been a way to transform himself from someone who is afraid to someone who frightens.⁷ The *Jurassic Park* series started with a sense of awe watching dinosaurs grazing in a soft meadow, depicted as a pastoral scene. Through human greed however, a paradise garden turns into hell. The only escape is either through innocent, childlike faith, or, as Richard Attenborough's character explicitly does, a confession of sin. The *Jurassic Park* series entertained viewers after the end of the Cold War, during a prolonged period of neo-capitalist economics, and the rise of the ecological movement, and both are reflected in the plot. Spielberg's deeply humanist message, however, has not prevailed. Capitalism rules like dinosaurs, and climate change can be denied. Spielberg is in some ways an entertaining preacher; one whose parables fascinate, albeit without lasting effect on an audience that loves the thrill but hates to be called to action. Over the years, while I was becoming fascinated by Spielberg's cinema, Protestant preaching in Germany focused heavily on ethical issues of peace, justice, and preservation of creation, all themes of the World Council of Churches (WCC). "Lead me from death to life, from falsehood to truth, / Lead me from despair to hope, from fear to trust. / Lead me from hate to love, from war to peace, / Let peace fill our beings, our world and our universe."⁸ This Prayer for Peace composed by Philip Potter for the WCC assembly in Vancouver 1983 intoned both fear and a longing for awe.

Finally, Steven Spielberg dared to take a close look at the most frightening monster of all: the human being, represented by Amon Goeth (played by Ralph Fiennes) in *Schindler's List* (USA, 1993), is not so different from ourselves, who randomly aims his gun at women, children, and men, and sends hundreds into the gas chambers of German Concentration camps. The camera takes us into the chamber of death. Fear is all around, but the most frightening thing of all is that this was not fiction, but fact. Still, *Schindler's List* also spoke about awe, when a rogue-like Oskar Schindler's soul is touched by the naked, vulnerable face of another human being, who must depend solely on

⁷ "Kino, das ist für Steven Spielberg immer auch ein Mittel, sich von dem, der Angst hat, in jenen zu verwandeln, der Angst macht." Georg Seesslen, Steven Spielberg und seine Filme, Marburg 2001, 68.

⁸ <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/1983-vancouver/prayer-for-peace>, inspired by the Peace Prayer of *St. Francis of Assisi* (early 13th century).

him. It is a moment Martin Buber (1923) described as the “I-Thou-relationship.” While the relationship between the human person and God is always an I-Thou one, the relationship between two people is very frequently an I-It one, in which the other is treated as an object. This is frightening. According to Buber, a human person’s relation to other creatures may sometimes enter the I-Thou realm – and this is the moment of awe. Somehow, Steven Spielberg’s work artfully illustrated Buber’s philosophy. Conversion of the heart starts with the realization that we must overcome our fear of the other by connecting, relating, communicating.

Movies, novels, and theater have been teachers for homileticians for many years now. Movies, like preaching, are part of our cultural discourse. Movies are indicators of the sense of fear and awe that we hold for the world we live in. This is the world we speak in and speak to when we preach, either prophetically, intensifying feelings of anxiety, or caressing the soul with the angelic greeting: Do not be afraid! Peace be with you.

Current trends in the movies, therefore, should closely be followed by homileticians. The superhero movie genre of the last two or three years, for example, has undergone a transformation. In the beginning, characters like Spiderman, Superman, Wolverine, or Katniss Everdeen from *The Hunger Games* were Christ-like figures, wounded healers, sacrificing themselves for the good of others, humble in their disguise, fearful of public recognition. Current super-hero-movies like *Avengers – Infinity War* however, present ultra-rich, narcissistic characters who fight to win, not caring for humans or any particular values. Film critic Susan Vahabzadeh wrote that the current trend of movies reflects pure escapism by repressing the frightening dangers in the real world.⁹ Today’s superheroes know nothing of fear, nor are they troubled by –or even aware – of the inner twists and frailties of character. Something seems to be changing in the emotional field of fear and awe.

1.4 The emotion of fear and sermons as paradigm scenarios

Ronald de Sousa’s theory of emotions describes a “rationality of emotion.”¹⁰ De Sousa understands emotions to have a cognitive dimension as well as a social dimension. While emotions are deeply subjective, they are also generic, accessible to different individuals. We learn to understand emotions by participation or observation of what de Sousa calls ‘paradigm scenarios.’ Being exposed to certain scenarios in culture not only teaches us about emotions, but trains us in appropriate action and reaction to them. For example, the paradigm scenario of the witch being

⁹ <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/kino-und-gesellschaft-vergessst-robin-hood-1.4026677-2>

¹⁰ Ronald de Sousa, *Die Rationalität des Gefühls*, Frankfurt a.M. 2016. First published as *The Rationality of Emotion*, Cambridge 1987.

burned can be exploited in political campaigns, generating shouts to “lock her up”: De Sousa says, “[we] are educated in the ways of emotions through fairy tales, fables, songs, plays, paintings, novels, and films as much as through direct experience.”¹¹ Biblical narratives can certainly be understood as paradigm scenarios.

Relating de Sousa’s theory to the study of religion, Dutch author Desiree Berendsen writes: “Emotions [...] function in a context. This context determines their meaning and their rationality.”¹² As we have seen with Steven Spielberg’s movies, sociocultural contexts determine meaning and reception. Berendsen applies this to religious context: In a “religious tradition [...] one learns to interpret specific emotions as religious emotions. [...] religious traditions are the paradigm scenarios for religious emotions in the sense that they are the context in which religious emotions are learned and that they provide ways to cope with those kinds of emotions.”¹³ If we want to understand fear in terms of religious emotions, we need to understand religious traditions of fear and awe as paradigm scenarios, because “religious communities are the places where people can become acquainted with these kinds of emotions.”¹⁴ What does this mean for preaching?

As we learn from cultural artefacts like film, experience can be simulated, invoking fabricated emotions by rhetorical means.¹⁵ Preaching, like film, works with emotions. Of course, it is only a small step between moving and manipulating. Emotions such as fear and anxiety are able to initiate strong physical and mental reaction, even generating behavioral responses.¹⁶ Demonizing or dehumanizing an individual or an ethnic group are well-known manipulative tricks in films and videos, and are able to raise populist sentiment. The world of preaching is no stranger to this. Shortly before and at the beginning of World War I, sermons preached to congregations in Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and even Russia, made heavy use of nationalist sentiments, creating apocalyptic fears and demonizing other nations¹⁷ to persuade congregations to follow in the call to war.

¹¹ *Murray Smith*, *Film, Art, and the Third Culture. A Naturalized Aesthetics of Film*, Oxford 2017, 199.

¹² *Desiree Berendsen*, *Religious Traditions as Paradigm Scenarios. Applying Ronald de Sousa’s concept to William James’ View on Religious Emotions*, in: Willem Lemmens, Walter van Herck (ed.), *Religious Emotions. Some Philosophical Explorations*, Cambridge 2008, 59–74, 63.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Author *Jörg Herrmann* quotes the famous title of *Ed.S. Tan*, „Film as an Emotion Machine” (1996). Cf. *Jörg Herrmann*, *Zuflucht für die Seele. Über Kino, Gefühl und Religion*, in: Lars Charbonnier/Matthias Mader/Birgit Weyel (eds.), *Religion und Gefühle. Praktisch-theologische Perspektiven einer Theorie der Emotionen*, Göttingen 2013, 203–216.

¹⁶ Cf. *Thomas Anz*, *Künste des Umgangs mit Gefühlen und ihre Wirkungen. Reflexionen zur Homiletik aus Perspektiven kulturwissenschaftlicher Emotionsforschung*, in: Alexander Deeg (ed.), *Erlebnis Predigt*. Leipzig 2014, 61–80.

¹⁷ Cf. *Martin Greschat*, *Christentum und Kirchen im Ersten Weltkrieg*, in: *Liturgie und Kultur* 5.2 (2014), 6–16.

If emotions like awe and fear are means of persuasion in preaching,¹⁸ then ethical issues arise. Fear is a strong emotion, one of the basic dimensions of what it means to be human. To preach on fear, as well as to arouse such emotions in preaching, requires a respect of the autonomy of the congregant, their emotional experience, and the dignity of their emotions in relationship to faith, religion and spirituality.¹⁹

2. The psychology of fear: fear as *conditio humanae*

2.1 When fear is an appropriate reaction to danger

Considering religious traditions of fear, let me share with you a story about Ms. Goldschmidt.²⁰ It is a paradigm scenario for my own preaching on fear.

I met her when I was working as chaplain in a Palliative Care unit of a large German university hospital. Ms. Goldschmidt was a woman in her 60s, diagnosed with incurable, advanced metastatic breast-cancer. Goldschmidt, who was single, had taken care of her late father who had died one and a half years before of cancer. She had two sisters, one of which she had felt very close to, but who had also died of breast-cancer one year ago, in the same clinic. We first met at that time. This time, the hospital staff informed me that she had severe symptoms of anxiety. Neither medication nor short-term psychological intervention improved her situation. She would not sleep at night, turning her into a nervous wreck and an unfriendly patient. Goldschmidt was a devout Roman Catholic, but responded well to me as a Lutheran chaplain, with a warm welcome whenever I offered a visit. After she had told me of her grief, we turned to the anxiety that kept her awake each night, trembling and shivering. “Is there something specific you are afraid of?” I asked. She replied: “No, there is nothing I could name.” She was not afraid of death as she looked forward to being back with deceased family members. She was not afraid of the process of dying as she had witnessed peaceful death. Nor was she afraid of God or divine punishment, as she trusted in a loving and forgiving God.

“You’re Catholic, aren’t you?” I asked, “do you have a special regard for the saints?”

“Oh yes,” she said, “I am especially fond of St. George.”

¹⁸ Cf. *Manuel Stetter*, *Die Predigt als Praxis der Veränderung. Ein Beitrag zur Grundlegung der Homiletik*, Göttingen 2018, 259ff.

¹⁹ German Practical Theologian *Friedrich Niebergall's* homiletic “Die modern Predigt” encouraged preachers to study congregants’ emotions, psychologically and statistically. He also admonished preachers to respect their feelings. Cf. *Albrecht Grözinger*, *Predigt und Gefühl. Eine homiletische Erkundungsreise*, in: Lars Charbonnier/Matthias Mader/Birgit Weyel (eds.): *Religion und Gefühle. Praktisch-theologische Perspektiven einer Theorie der Emotionen*, Göttingen 2013, 314–325.

²⁰ The name is a pseudonym. The patient allowed me to tell her story for educational purposes.

“Isn’t he the one who killed dragons?” I asked. She nodded. Since she had no picture of the saint, I returned to my office, printing out a b/w copy of one of the traditional images. I suggested that she might meditate on this picture and pray for St. George’s support when the anxiety returned at night. Goldschmidt followed my advice, and the next day she smiled and said that it had worked well; but, alas, the next night, the painting and the prayer didn’t help anymore. The art therapist who had seen the b/w print on the table, asked if she could work with the patient. They put colors to the picture, gold for George’s armor, grey and black for the dragon. Focusing on the dragon, they worked on its contours, defining it, thus limiting its extent. As they colored St. George’s lance, Ms. Goldschmidt suddenly said: “He doesn’t kill the dragon. He just keeps the lance in its mouth as if to contain it.” In fact, the dragon on the picture seemed to stay alive. Goldschmidt later told me that through the process of coloring the image she learned that her fear, just like a dragon, would not go away, but with the help of others, especially her faith in saints, it could be contained and limited in extent. She was able to live with fear, finding peace of mind, and getting some rest while still living with fear until death. The picture of St. George – not as a dragon slayer, but as a tamer of fear – functioned as a paradigm scenario, teaching her to cope with fear. Her Roman Catholic tradition, while sometimes blamed for teaching negative religious coping skills, in this case was helpful. Her appreciation of the saints, often assumed to be an aspect of extrinsic religion, had become a personal faith experience, becoming intrinsic religion (Allport), helping to cope with fear-related problems in a positive way.

Psychologist of religion Kenneth Pargament describes how religious coping performs five major functions: to discover meaning, to garner control, to acquire comfort by virtue of closeness to God, to achieve closeness with others, and to transform life.²¹ In Ms. Goldschmidt’s case, all five functions were fulfilled during the art therapy process. She discovered meaning and self-efficacy; she gained control over her situation; she experienced closeness to a saint and thus to God; she found a connection with others, especially hospital staff; and her life was transformed from being fear-ridden to being able to approach death and the afterlife with hope and courage.

2.2 Symptoms of fear in End-of-Life Care

Preaching is a different form of communication than one-on-one counseling or silently being with a person. But communication, in the end, needs to reach both the heart and soul of each individual congregant. Preaching is a transformative praxis, engaging both preacher and congregant.²²

²¹ Kenneth I. Pargament/Harold G. Koenig/Lisa M. Perez, The many methods of religious coping. Development and initial validation of RCOPE, in: *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 564 (2000), 519–543.

²² Cf. *Manuel Stetter* 2018. Cf. also *Albrecht Grözinger’s* remarks on Niebergall’s homiletic: the essence of preaching according to Niebergall is transformation, ‘Veränderungen in Menschen’. *Grözinger* (note 19), 321.

Preachers first need to understand the subjective emotions of people, before they start working with them. Ms. Goldschmidt helped me to understand the religion-related aspects of fear in psychological terms: differentiating between extrinsic and intrinsic religion, and asking about their contribution to coping mechanisms. Following this approach, I want to explore more deeply the emotion of fear using existential situations such as Palliative Care.

Within Palliative Care, fear and anxiety – next to depression – are the most common psychological symptoms of patients suffering from terminal disease. Manifestations of fear differ vastly, from fear as appropriate reaction to sickness to psychopathological forms described in the International Code of Diagnosis (ICD 10). Almost 50 % of all cancer patients are heavily burdened by fear of some sort, more than 11 % from pathological fear (panic etc.). Fear is correlated with poor communication with others, especially health care staff, a lack of social support, and recurring experience of pain and breathing problems.²³ Objects of fear differ: some are illness-related, others are related to impending death. Objects of fear can include religious themes such as fear of punishment, feelings of guilt, and fear of God. Fear manifests itself in somatic forms like increased heart rhythm, shortness of breath, trembling, diarrhea, sweating, dry mouth, and weakness. Symptoms of fear disable patients' concentration and ability to think clearly. Fear sometimes is a reaction to concrete danger or an ill-defined expectation that something bad is going to happen. It can come as a sudden panic attack or as permanent insecurity. Very often, fear results in an inability to take action, leading to tenseness and fatigue, suppressed aggressiveness and growing depression.

Current psychological theories – apart from Palliative Care – understand fear as *conditio humanae*. Following S. Freud's approach, psychoanalytical concepts try to understand fear from the depths of human existence and human disorders. Fear has both constructive and destructive dimensions.²⁴ It is first encountered as affective reaction to a baby's separation from its mother causing a sensation of existential danger, guilt, and shame. Psychoanalysis assumes that fear always signals relationship disorders, pointing at dangers to a person's connectedness with others, with the self, or with transcendence. All forms of fear have to do with the loss of something one feels closely connected with, the experience of utter isolation and a lack of purpose. But, according to Jean-Paul Sartre's (atheistic) reading of Gen 3, the experience of fear is the core condition of the possibility of human freedom, forcing the person to fully become one's self.²⁵ From a theological

²³ Cf. Leitlinienprogramm Onkologie der Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Wissenschaftlichen Medizinischen Fachgesellschaften e. V. (AWMF), Deutschen Krebsgesellschaft e. V. (DKG) und Deutschen Krebshilfe (DKH) (Hg.), S3-Leitlinie Palliativmedizin für Patienten mit einer nicht heilbaren Krebserkrankung, Teil 2, Entwurf (publication in 2019); cf. also James C. Ballenger et al., Consensus statement on depression, anxiety, and oncology, in: J Clin Psychiatry 62 (2001) Suppl 8, 64-67.

²⁴ Cf. Sabine Ibben-Bahl, Angst und die eine Wirklichkeit. Paul Tillich's transdisziplinäre Angsttheorie im Dialog mit gegenwärtigen Emotionskonzepten. Inaugural Dissertation, Münster (manuscript 2018), 263.

²⁵ Cf. Angelika Ebrecht-Laermann, Angst, Gießen 2014, 14f.

point of view, the situation of being disconnected and estranged is the utter meaning of sin: being separated from oneself, from others, from God. Existential fear is, in a way, a non-dogmatic experience of sin. Experiencing fear is a deeply emotional process of realizing oneself as a sinner. Thus, it makes no sense – neither on a theological nor on an empathy-oriented level – to tell someone: “You don’t need to be afraid. Everything is going to be alright!”²⁶ Someone suffering from a severe illness or experiencing existential fear needs to be taken seriously. His or her existential feelings have a place in the realm of the sacred. As the hymn “Amazing Grace” puts it, a fear-stricken patient considers himself or herself to be a “wretch like me.” Sometimes, terminally ill patients blame themselves, taking a review of life lived, of missed opportunities, broken relationships, broken promises, unanswered prayers. Very often, patients are afraid that the isolation, meaninglessness, and disconnectedness will never go away. This is what “a wretch like me” feels like.

The constructive aspect of fear is that fear of separation proves that relations are real and meaningful. That there is “amazing grace.” Paul Tillich, in his classic *The Courage to Be*, demonstrated that fear fundamentally reveals the reality of the human being as well as the reality of God as Being-Itself or Ground of Being. Fear, in Tillich’s terms, is a sense of reality and one’s perception of reality. Fear is a genuine perception of transcendence. Fear represents reality, revealing the existential need for being connected. Nevertheless, fear can be a heavy burden and thus should not go untreated.

2.3 Treating symptoms of fear

Treatment suggestions within Palliative Care as well as in Psychotherapy clearly advise an open approach to fear and a deep exploration of fear by validated assessment tools like the GAD-2 (Generalized Anxiety Disorder)²⁷. Exploration of fear means that patients are being asked precisely what it is that they are afraid of, exactly how they feel fear, where they feel it in themselves, when it began, and how often and how long these feelings occur. Assessment tools help therapists to understand how heavy the symptoms of fear weigh on a patient. A therapist’s goal is not the elimination of fear, but an understanding and, eventually, a transformation of fear.²⁸

²⁶ Cf. *Shelly Lyons’* report on her experience in the Anxiety Series, a series from The Lily, published by The Washington Post. *Shelly Lyons*, Constant knots and an uneasiness in my stomach, in: The Washington Post, July 19, 2018. *Lyons* writes she doesn’t “need to be pitied, judged, or told, ‘Just don’t worry so much’ or ‘Oh, just do it!’ In those moments, what’s most helpful is empathy, a reminder to take slow deep breaths and ground [one]self, maybe a hug, and eventually a good laugh.”

²⁷ <https://adaa.org/understanding-anxiety/generalized-anxiety-disorder-gad>.

²⁸ Cf. *Ebrecht-Laermann* (note 25), 98.

If there is any advice for preachers in this it is to respect the reality of fear. Emotions of fear exist within congregants and can be experienced as physical, psychological, social, and spiritual reality. Fear must not be created. Many congregants may have concrete histories of fear, some may presently be burdened with fear. Preparing for sermons, it may be helpful to reflect upon these assessment tools with specific congregants in mind. Can a sermon help them explore their feelings? Can it transform fear of isolation into a sense of being connected to the Ground of Being, in order to be able to hear and understand the gospel message, “Do not be afraid!”?

As the art therapist in Ms. Goldschmidt’s case was able to do, the explorative process sometimes needs to transcend verbal conversion and include *gestalt*, nonverbal, creative forms. This is something that is easily applied to homiletics as sermons are always embedded in a liturgical context, and include sensual elements, especially music.²⁹ I was reminded of this when President Barack Obama, in his eulogy for the Reverend Clementa Pinckney, after the Charleston shooting in June 2015, inserted lines from “Amazing Grace” as a refrain, and finally started to sing the hymn in a hesitating, broken manner. It not only encouraged the whole congregation, but many others to hum and finally sing along, facing the terror of mass shootings by singing a song known to be meaningful and powerful, a song that could be trusted.³⁰

Music, songs, like touch, sometimes allow for regressive reassurance. Childhood images, symbols, and rituals of faith (i.e., remembering what felt consoling and reassuring as a child) very often hint at ways to re-connect and overcome the sense of isolation. The caressing touch of a parent’s hand, the lullaby helping to go into a dark night’s sleep. In Palliative Care, chaplains often work to help patients and families reconnect to childhood memories and family rituals and recreate these in the current existential situation. Past paradigm scenarios are remembered to cope with current situations.

To sum up my point from pastoral care: Fear is part of the *conditio humanae*. Fear need not be spiritualized or theologized but needs to be understood from experience. Emotion and cognition belong together and can be described neurologically. Former experiences of fear and consolation are recorded and stored in our brain. Sometimes emotions, both of fear and of consolation, can be triggered by words and symbols which reconnect to earlier experiences.³¹ Fear is a reality in itself, or at least is experienced as real. Ignoring fear in proclamation (that is, a “fearless proclamation”) is not an option. Consolation, however, is real as well. Situations of consolation, very often

²⁹ Cf. *Patrick Archie/Eduardo Bruera/Lorenzo Coben*, Music-based interventions in palliative cancer care. A review of quantitative studies and neurobiological literature, in: *Support Care Cancer*, 21.9 (2013), 2609–2624.

³⁰ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2015/06/26/transcript-obama-delivers-eulogy-for-charleston-pastor-the-rev-clementa-pinckney/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.fddf6a913bd1.

³¹ With this, I follow *Williams James*’ classical approach to emotions in *William James*, *What is an emotion?* First published in: *Mind* 1884.

contained in scripture and Gospel readings, are paradigm scenarios, teaching anxious beings the courage to be, to trust and to believe.

3. Understanding fear from within: The anxiety of the preacher

I will never forget one evening in 2001, when I attended an ecumenical evening prayer service at the Cathedral in Munich, a few days after 9/11. The presiders at the service were Roman-Catholic Cardinal Friedrich Wetter and Lutheran Bishop Hermann von Loewenich. They did not try to explain anything of what had happened. They did not even describe the devastation that had taken place in Manhattan. All they did, at least in my recollection, was to recite Psalm 46 line by line, with long pauses in between.

“God *is* our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. / Therefore we will not fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the heart of the sea; / Though the waters thereof roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling” (ESV, Ps 46:2–3). In hindsight, Psalm 46 functioned as paradigm scenario for a rightfully frightened crowd to experience trust: “God *is* in the midst of her; she shall not be moved: God shall help her, *at break of day.*”

I remember how I felt on 9/11 and the days after. I remember how important it was to share my anxiety with others, trying to find consolation in the words of scripture and the hymns of our mothers and fathers. I remember how *Angst* felt to me as a congregant. It was fear in more than one dimension: from terror’s rough grip to the lingering fear of inevitable war, from fear for a beloved friend’s life who lived in a Manhattan to anxiety that the world as we knew it would never be the same. I was thankful to the Cardinal and the Bishop for turning to the words of the Psalms. There was ‘containment’ in them, *they contained my fear, a container of emotion*. It was, alas, way too early for consolation.

How, if anything, does consolation feel? Let me take you to a church service on Easter Sunday morning in 2007. I had recently become a widower, due to the death of my partner from cancer. I was going through the complete grief’s handbook of emotions. I went hoping for some experience of ‘Easter.’ The hymns were helpful, sung by the congregation around me, including friends and family. But the sermon, delivered by an accomplished and theologically sound pastor, didn’t mean anything to me. I remember almost nothing of the sermon – which mainly reflected upon a symbolic understanding of Easter. But I strongly remember my growing hostility towards the

preacher: “You have no idea how it feels! You have no idea what death and grief means. If you don’t know that, how dare you tell me about resurrection?”

I know that my sentiments were unjust. I may simply have not been able to listen carefully and with the right attitude. But that is not my point. What I learned from this experience is an understanding that congregants always attend religious services for a reason. Some may be there for entertainment, some to escape everyday life for an hour of praise and glory. But there will always be someone who is going through a time of anxiety and who is in need of being reconnected to real faith. Someone within the congregation needs “the preacher as witness,”³² to testify “on behalf of the people, for their belief and understanding.”³³ This listener will critically weigh the preacher’s claim to truth. Tom G. Long writes that “the preacher as witness is not authoritative because of rank or power but rather because of what the preacher has seen and heard.”³⁴ While the witness is “testifying to a gospel larger than the preacher’s personal faith,”³⁵ he or she is involved in it by some sort of personal experience. Preaching testifies to the truth of the gospel before the internal court of each listener – and foremost – the internal court of a conscious preacher.

3.1 Martin Luther as witness to transforming fear

The best witness to this is Martin Luther. Fear was, in Luther’s early years, helpful in the salvific process, as fear of judgement leads to confession of sin.³⁶

Luther’s experience and theological reasoning developed. In 1519, Luther published sermons that give insight into his experience as a pastor to others as well as his own frightened conscience. He no longer appreciated fear; Luther had also experienced the devastating effects of fear and concluded: “Fear does nothing good. Thus, one needs to be free and cheerful in all things and stand firmly.”³⁷ Luther understood that the constant confrontation with anxious self-reflection perpetuates anxiety. Rather, Luther turned to the image of the suffering Christ. Meditating upon Christ’s trembling in the passion narratives, he understood that Christ took fear on himself as part of human existence, going through and finally overcoming fear. By faith alone, there is no need to fear. Fear to Luther has no religious or spiritual quality. Also, fear has no pedagogical function.³⁸ Justification happens by grace alone. Luther is fully aware that fear still holds him in its grip as it

³² *Thomas G. Long*, *The Witness of Preaching*, Louisville, KY 2005.

³³ *Ibid.*, 46.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 50.

³⁶ In an early sermon from the year 1515, *Luther* talks about fear as “*timor Dei*”. Cf. *Thorsten Dietz*, *Der Begriff der Furcht bei Luther*, Tübingen 2009.

³⁷ Translated from WA 2, 107: “*Forcht thut nichts guts.*”; quoted by *Dietz* (note 36), 228.

³⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, 250.

does others. During the 1520s – with war and upheaval, pestilence and death all around – there were many things to be afraid of. Luther was himself struck by panic attacks and anxiety. His treatment for himself as his advice to others was – more than the spoken word – music, especially hymns based on psalms. These hymns do not ignore fear but put fear into words and sound, thus defining fear, and then call upon God to break fear’s spell. Shortly before Martin Luther’s father died, Luther wrote a letter to him, referring to Psalm 91: “He will cover you with his pinions, / and under his wings you will find refuge; / his faithfulness is a shield and buckler. / You will not fear the terror of the night, / nor the arrow that flies by day, / nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness, / nor the destruction that wastes at noonday” (ESV, Ps 91:4–6). Luther writes, “Trust Christ, who strangled death, complete with all sins, who will await you.”³⁹

Martin Luther is a witness to the reality of fear even as he testifies to the power of faith. Martin Luther’s theology is a theology of experience: “Sola experientia facit theologum.”⁴⁰ The external word of scripture needs to become heartfelt truth, “Herzenglauben.”⁴¹ Luther learned as much from life-long contesting, by being challenged by fears, the dangers of life and work, inner demons, and desperation, as he learned from studying scripture.

3.2 The preacher’s need to face and confront one’s own demons

Nevertheless, reading Luther’s sermons we understand that, fear-ridden as he was, his inner emotions caused him to demonize his adversaries. Right until his last sermons, days before his own death, his sermons were full of anti-Jewish sentiments,⁴² hinting at internal turmoil turned outwardly, victimizing others.

In German homiletic literature, it took until the second half of the 20th century to understand that the character and personal traits of a preacher have greatly influence his or her preaching. Fear as a *psychological* reality within the preacher’s mind was considered peripheral, since the preacher as subject was not of interest, being nothing but a herald of the truth. It took brave theologians to finally take a closer look at the psychology of preachers, against the tendency of mainstream homiletics. Psychological insights, mainly Sigmund Freud’s and Carl G. Jung’s psychoanalytic theories, opened new understandings of the role of the preacher as person.

³⁹ *Martin Luther’s* letter is included in Albrecht Beutel (ed.), *Martin Luther. Den Menschen nahe. Briefe an Freunde und an die Familie*, Leipzig 2011, 53–56. There is no need to be afraid. Even if *Luther* in his *Small Catechism* (1529) starts his explanation of the first commandment with the words “We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things”, the accent is not on the verbs fear, love, and trust, but God. God is sufficient – fear can be dealt with, because God is above all things.

⁴⁰ *Albrecht Beutel*, *Theologie als Erfahrungswissenschaft*, in: idem (ed.), *Luther-Handbuch*, Tübingen 32017, 503–509.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 507.

⁴² Cf. *Heinz Schilling*, *Martin Luther. Rebell in einer Zeit des Umbruchs. Eine Biographie*, München 32017, 590.

One of the pioneers of pastoral psychology in Germany is Otto Haendler (1890–1981), who lived and published in East Germany. Haendler, a close friend of Paul Tillich since his early youth, started studying psychoanalysis in 1935 in Berlin, including 150 hours of training analysis following C.G. Jung’s school. Being ousted by the Nazis from a teaching position, he published a book on preaching in 1941 based on the psychology of the unconscious.⁴³ Haendler focused on the importance of the preacher as subject: “I am condemned to preach the way I am. It cannot be more, and it should not be less.” Only preachers who know their own inner depths, will be able to reach the depths of the souls of congregants. Wherever a preacher is violent against himself, he will use violence against others. No wonder, then, that Otto Haendler wrote in length on the subject of fear. In the early 1950s, after surviving the terror of the Nazi regime and WW II and being faced with the threat of atomic war in the Cold War, Haendler wrote on “fear as humanity’s scourge that rules horribly in all parts of the world.”⁴⁴ This forced him to try to understand its origin and to discuss the means by which it might be overcome. Distinguishing the different forms of fear, Haendler was able to show that faith does not eradicate fear. Faith, as trust in God, helps us instead to embrace and understand one’s innermost fear and its deepest roots. Most of all, Haendler encouraged readers to face their own fear, trying to understand and differentiate, to become aware of and not be afraid of it. Haendler’s goal as a psychotherapist as well as a preacher was “Lebenshilfe”: helping people to live their lives. A preacher’s goal is not to move people to fear God. The fear of God helps people to not be afraid in a frightened world, but to be free to love, to be free of fear, and free to hope. Haendler developed his psychologically informed concept of preaching from the teaching experience. The inner struggles of the preacher all showed in the outspoken word of the sermon, very often leading to judgmental, moralist sermons.

Preaching, however, is the art of supporting people to live life, liberated by the gospel. After my partner died of cancer, I had to deal not only with my own grief. I had to grapple with inner struggles: what if the God I believed in simply did not exist? What purpose was there in my life as a chaplain and preacher if life can be taken away from you when you’re only 48 years old – or even younger, as many of my patients were? What if my own professional existence is built on self-deception? What can I be a witness to if I can only witness to the reality of death?

One verse from Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians helped me, supported by some 60 hours of psychoanalysis. “My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness.” Fear is not weakness, but fear weakens. Preaching in a frightened world means preaching from

⁴³ *Otto Haendler*, *Die Predigt. Tiefenpsychologische Grundlagen und Grundfragen*, Berlin 1941. Cf. *Traugott Roser*, *Otto Haendler (1890–1981). Pionier psychologisch fundierter Pastoralpsychologie*, in: Klaus Raschzok/Karl-Heinz Röhlhlin (eds.), *Kleine Geschichte der Seelsorge im 20. Jahrhundert. Biographische Essays*, Leipzig 2018, 113–122. Cf. also *Michael Klessmann*, *Pastoralpsychologie. Ein Lehrbuch*, Neukirchen-Vluyn 2004, 626f.

⁴⁴ *Otto Haendler*, *Angst und Glaube*, Berlin 1952.

within, aware of our own frightening personal traits, yet witnessing to a gospel that sets us free to live life and inspires us to overcome obstacles. To witness to truth is to witness to what we find to be true in our lives; that which is worth living for. Upon returning to chaplaincy, I found deep gratification in my work with patients, *simply being with* frightened patients and their families. There is more truth to love than there is reality in death.

Epilogue

In his 2017 movie “The Post,” Steven Spielberg tells the story of Katharine Graham, the first female publisher of a major American newspaper. Against threats by Richard Nixon’s government that she would be sentenced to jail and the newspaper The Washington Post be destroyed, she published classified documents on the Vietnam War. Katharine Graham, played by Meryl Streep, faces her fears and decides to stick with truth, even if lies seem to prevail. It is her mission to speak up against those who create an atmosphere of fear. Steven Spielberg knows how to create paradigm scenarios of courage desperately needed in a time of leaders who are seemingly not afraid of anything, not even exploiting the fear of God.

It is never too late for preachers to do likewise: “May God grant us help and safe passage / to show us his path / and lead us in his ways.”

Traugott Roser, born 1964, is Professor of Practical Theology in Münster, Germany.

traugott.rosler@uni-muenster.de