

One of the conversations that frequently comes-up around the dinner table at youth group is what kinds of movies freak us out. I run the risk of being a downer in these conversations because I don't watch horror movies – and this is because I remember seeing one in college that just put me over the top. Thought I only made it about half way through, I couldn't stop thinking about it. The images stayed with me. I didn't lose any sleep, but I was so troubled by the film's representation of evil that I thought for days about why it is that we like to be scared. Why do we pay money to have powerful emotions artificially manufactured, and do these powerful emotions cause us to become less enchanted and more fearful of the world?

In and of itself fear isn't a bad thing. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,” say both the psalmist and the writer of proverbs. There is a kind of fear that grounds us in reality – it gives us a picture of the way things are - it's not a good idea to kick a hornet's nest. Every firefighter who has ever rushed into a burning building is kept alert by the adrenaline generated by the part of his brain flashing danger signals. But there's another kind of fear that is totally inappropriate given the circumstances - the kind that might be rooted in a true story, but is allowed to take on a life of its own when given free reign by our imaginations.

Let me describe to you what I'm taking about. I experienced this sort of fear first hand a few years back thanks to a trip to the dentist. I had gotten a really bad infection due to a hastily performed wisdom tooth extraction, so I was going in to see what could be done and that's when the doctor said the two words that have paralyzed many with fear: root and canal. I didn't go back for two years. It got to the point where I had become so afraid of the thought of a root canal that I lived with the constant annoyance of an open hole in my molar rather than going to the dentist. Determined that I was being ridiculous, one of my friends, asked me what I thought the worst that could happen and I said, “I could *die!*”

It's important that you know that this fear came about entirely due to an episode of the T.V. show *Night Court*. I am fairly certain that it's the *only* episode of *Night Court* that I ever saw – and the show went off the air in 1992, when I was just starting high school. But there was this episode where John Larroquette's character went to the dentist and he was walking around the entire time in an exaggerated state of agony with an icepack permanently affixed to his face. The culprit? Root canal. That's all it took for me to be afraid. Somehow the image of his pain stuck with me.

I finally screwed up enough courage to do something about it only because my dental insurance would end when I left my job to begin Seminary. So the dreaded day came – I sat down in the dentist's chair and waited for the pain to take hold of my body. But the strangest thing happened. I'm waiting for him to begin and after 45 minutes – which seemed like 45 years – the doctor announced that he was done and that I could go. You have to understand I was perplexed. I didn't even know he had started. He must have sensed my disbelief because he added, "It's almost never as bad as they say it is".

All of that unnecessary pain; all of those ridiculous scenarios and all of that mental torture – for what?

I tell you that story because I think something like that is going on in this morning's scripture reading from Numbers. Moses has led the Israelites out of Egypt and through the desert for forty years. They are standing on the threshold of the land that God has led them to – a land flowing with milk and honey, no less – but they don't want to go in. They see the descendents of Anak, and they begin to curse under their breath that they had ever decided to let Moses convince them to leave Egypt.

That kind of begs the question, who is Anak? And why should his descendents, the Anakites - or as they are more commonly referred to, the Anakim - cause so much fear? Well, according to the scriptures, the descendents of Anak were fierce, giant warriors who lived in heavily fortified cities. Legend has it that they were descendents of the Nephilim, an even mightier and more horrific race of Giants who, according to the sixth chapter of Genesis, were the result of the illicit coupling of human women with divine beings.

To put it another way, the exploits of the Anakim were mythic in stature and proportion – a race of beings that were supposed to be god-like in strength and size. They were a people who, according to the scriptures, troubled the Hebrew people time and time again. Long after the events described here, the Israelites will confront the descendents of Anak when warfare or other events crop-up to unsettle the people. Some of their more well known include the Philistine, Goliath and Gog of Magog.

The Bible doesn't really go into much detail about the Anakim and I think it's a good thing that the historical identity of these people remains a mystery. If we knew for certain who they were and what they looked like, it might be too easy to make excuses for the text and dismiss its relevance. Since all we know about the Anakim is that they are the ones who struck so much fear into the hearts of the people that they would rather abandon the land that God had promised them, the land which they had traveled so long to get to, than face their fears, we have a story that speaks to us.

In the context of this story they embody the problem that is too big, the obstacle too great, the sorrow too heavy to bear – the very thing that strikes fear into the hearts of the people that keeps them from seeing any possibility that God has already won the victory.

Seen this way, we encounter Anakim all the time.

In their book *Resident Aliens*, Will Willimon and Stanley Haerwas describe a story of a pastor who served for five stormy and difficult years at the Shady Grove congregation somewhere in the deep-south during the turbulent decade of the 60's. After twenty years the congregation had invited the – now retired – minister back to preach on the occasion of the church's 100-year anniversary. Smiling, and a bit perplexed, the minister regarded their warm invitation a bit ironic since this was, after all, the same congregation that asked the bishop to remove him after only a month. Apparently they had been angered by his constant appeals over racial justice and his known opposition to the then current Vietnam War. As he considered the invitation he recalled how twenty years earlier the church was so bitterly opposed to the idea of reaching out to the African-American families that had begun

integrating into the community. They were afraid that by so doing, they would have to change. They were afraid that they'd lose prestige in the eyes of their peers. They were afraid of the very neighbors whom God had placed in their midst and called them to welcome. The people of Shady Grove were so afraid of what *could* happen, that they allowed their fears to overshadow their belief in a God who was calling them to move forward and to be faithful to their calling as Christians in a changing world. For that congregation, being faced with a situation in which they might actually have to confront those fears made them feel like a bit like trying to slay a giant with five smooth stones.

This is what makes the Anakim so dangerous. They have the ability to make us so afraid that we begin to see impossibilities everywhere. We know the challenges we face. Traditional mainline churches have long been faced with momentous societal changes. Be they in the form of a modestly growing population that has no and wants no religious affiliation, or be it the cultural reality that the most thoroughgoing program of formation in North America is one molding young people into consumers. The challenges are real and they are daunting. And we encounter them more often than we realize; every time God is challenging us to move forward and embrace new experiences or opportunities, or perhaps even new territories. Times of transition, good and bad alike.

But institutions are not the only places troubled by the Anakim. Often we see their tall shadows stretching into our daily lives. we encounter them perhaps when we lose jobs or when relationships fall apart, or are bereaved of loved ones, or when we move, or have children – the uncertainty of the time, the unfamiliarity of the new situation – the emotional trials of all these circumstances are the perfect conditions for us to lose sight of the God who has gone before us and bids us follow. It's easy in these circumstances to feel like the Israelites - a grasshopper in a world of giants.

I imagine that we have all fallen victim to the Anakim at some time or another. Uncertainty breeds fear, but if we lose perspective we can allow these fears to take on divine powers. Focused only on the challenges, we cannot hear Caleb saying, "The Promised land is indeed good, and it's right over these hills. Don't let the Anakim get in the way, God has already won!" And if we fail to hear his voice and believe, we will be in danger of suffering

the same disappointment of the Israelites. The real tragedy of the story is that they faced years of sorrow all because they chose the wilderness over the Promised land.

We see the same thing at work in the morning's Gospel lesson. The disciples are unable to heal the boy and Jesus is puzzled by their lack of faith. They have seen him heal the sick, feed thousands, walk on water, and have confessed that he is the Messiah. In the verses immediately before, Jesus is transfigured – the disciples have just had the mountaintop encounter with the living God and Jesus has given them the authority to make the Father's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. They know all of this, but apparently it's all a bit academic. When it comes to putting their knowledge and faith to work, they appear stumped.

Like so many things, there is a matter of perspective at stake. At the heart of our story is the question of seeing. Moses points out that the people saw the great and terrible wilderness through which they safely passed, *they saw* that the Lord actually fought on their behalf, *they saw* the God of heaven and earth split the waters and miraculously provide food for them. They saw their creator provide water from a rock and heal their infirmities when they had no hope. All of these things took place before their eyes, but when the spies get back from their scouting expedition from Canaan, we are left to wonder: *did they really see them?* Apparently, here, they saw only the Anakim – the might of the enemy was apparent but not the power of God. Suddenly we see that this is really a story about faith and unbelief. Because they did not see the Lord's power, they did not see the possibility of the good land. They did not even notice when the Lord their God carried them through the wilderness like a father carries a child...

What have you seen God do? Where have you been carried? I wonder if those questions ran through the mind of the retired minister who stepped into the pulpit of the Shady Grove congregation that he had left twenty years earlier. I wonder that because as he got up to preach he saw something completely unexpected – as he began to deliver his message he saw his eyes met by a sea of unfamiliar faces. The congregation that was so reluctant to welcome any of their African-American neighbors 20 years ago was now almost a quarter African American. In his sermon he pointed to people who in bold and amazing

ways determined that Shady Grove would be a congregation that not only welcomed all who came, but also one that actively went out and sought people to become part of their worshipping community. He then understood that the reason he had been called back to preach that day is that he had been faithful to his calling. And in time the congregation had become a people who were faithful to their calling.

They certainly saw the Anakim in the form of their fears and apprehensions, but in their faith they encountered a God who had already prepared the way for them.

As we move into the next phase of our vision process, the strategic initiative phase, we will certainly uncover and run into some giant-sized obstacles and apprehensions. But if we are to be a community of commitment, compassion, courage, faith, and love, we are going to need to see past the impossibilities and see the God for whom all things are possible. The challenges will be real, but the power of God is greater.

Madelene L'Engel writes, "our fear is less frequent and infinitely less if we are close to the creator". When we truly see the power of God, we too can put our fears aside and move on. Remember, the God who has carried us this far through the desert is not going to abandon us now.

Let us Pray.

Almighty God, yours is a love stronger than our fear. By your Spirit draw close to you that we may know the fullness of your love in Jesus. Through your Word, shape us to be a people who see the possibilities of a world that is being reconciled to you. Grant us the grace to see what you have done in our lives and let us remember the ways that you have been good to us. Give us the courage and the conviction to go where you lead, and the faith to assure that while we may not know the way, you do and you will walk with us. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.