

Sharks in the waters

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Many years ago I became an advanced open water diver. If you've never been scuba diving, it is the most peaceful, beautiful experience. It's just you, the sound of your breathing, and all the wonders the ocean has to offer. Two of the reasons I chose to learn to dive are that I am claustrophobic and I am afraid of sharks. You'd think that a person with both these things would avoid diving, right? Yes, except that I cannot tolerate my choices being ruled by fear.

As it turned out, the claustrophobia wasn't an issue for me because I didn't feel confined in any way by the gear required for diving. The shark thing was another issue, though. I saw one, once. Now it seems funny, but it didn't seem amusing then at all.

I was with two other people and we planned a simple dive near Humarock Beach in Massachusetts. The goal was to give us more practice and maybe catch a few lobsters for dinner. We swam out to the rocks where we planned to dive. One person dove down and two of us were still on the surface. My friend was having some difficulty letting herself sink. I was talking her through what she needed to do when I saw a very large dorsal fin about 100 feet behind her.

All my calmness vanished. I yanked on the flag line to let the other person know there was a problem and quietly asked my friend who was a total novice if she saw what I saw. She did. The three of us swam as fast as we could to the nearest shore. If anyone had seen us, it was probably pretty entertaining to see three grown women in full scuba gear scramble for the rocky shore. I don't think that shark knew we were even there. But my thought was that if we were looking for dinner, maybe the shark was, too. When we stopped by the dive shop a little while later, we were informed that it was a basking shark. Absolutely harmless since they have no teeth.

I felt foolish for giving into my fear that day. Fear is a powerful emotion. It can keep us safe and prevent us from engaging in harmful activities. However, fear can easily cross from healthy and practical to unhealthy and irrational. A fear of sharks is

healthy until it prevents you from swimming in the ocean. A fear that reminds you to be cautious in strange places or with unknown people, is reasonable and smart until it prevents you from going out of your house or making friends with your neighbors.

It's the latter kind of fear that seems to be flowing through the U.S. today. You've heard the politicians and seen the way people respond. There's nothing smart or reasonable about the xenophobia, racism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and the other nonsense about immigrants, refugees, and people of color that floods the media.

What concerns me is that people of faith buy into this kind of fear that breeds hatred and violence. What kind of faith do we have when we become so fearful of people who are somehow different from who we understand ourselves to be? Think of Abram. How different would our faith story be if fear had taken over his capacity for reason or his ability to trust in God.

Abram endured visions and a "deep and terrifying darkness" before he entered into a covenant with God that would lead him to unexpected places. Abram would have had every reason to run away screaming. In fact, we don't know that others did not. Maybe Abram wasn't the first that God approached with the offer of the covenant that would create a great nation from his offspring.

Maybe Abram was simply the first to trust that God would indeed be his shield and that the reward would be great. I have no doubt that Abram was all kinds of anxious as he stepped into the future God offered him. Yet Abram didn't let his fear bind him to the dark and terrifying places. He heard the promise God spoke to him out of the depths, through the dark. And his life was transformed.

It feels to me like we as a nation, if not the whole world, have bound ourselves to Abram's deep and terrifying darkness and aren't willing to sit still long enough to hear God saying, "Fear not." I am convinced that we have no reason to be afraid if we follow Paul's advice and walk in the way of Christ. If we hold fast to a faith that says, "Fear not, I am with you" and guides us in the way of peace, how can we fail to find a way through all that frightens us? Fear is real but not always based on reality and, in and of itself, fear is seldom a good justification for inaction.

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