



Scaredy Pants

It was just a simple trip to the drug store to get a jar of Mentholatum for my wife, back in the early days of the pandemic.

Restrictions were just beginning, but folks in the checkout line voluntarily spaced themselves six feet apart—except for the guy behind me.

I turned around to see a large, 30-something, full-bearded fellow, looking maybe like a longshoreman. “Dude,” I reminded him pleasantly enough, “could you move back just a little?” He stared at me. “Social distancing, y’know?” I said, motioning with my hands.

He continued to stare for a while and finally spoke. “You don’t tell me what to do!”

“Not really” I answered. “I’m just suggesting...”

“Scaredy pants! Scaredy pants!” he boomed.

Other customers were casting sidelong glances and beginning to fidget. “Well,” I laughed, “I suppose I am a bit scared—septuagenarian—wife at home with a high-risk condition and...”

“What?! I don’t care! You’re a scaredy pants!”

The conversation seemed unproductive, so I ignored the fellow, checked out and left.

Back home, sitting in our living room, I pondered—if I were a bona fide scaredy pants, would I have engaged such a guy? I shared the story with my neighbor, who actually is a longshoreman (a union leader no less). He commented that no self-respecting longshoreman would use the term scaredy pants, and he had a more longshoremanly couple of words to describe the guy I had encountered.

I had apparently run into one of those people who balk at sensible public health guidelines. A couple of weeks later, they turned it into a political/constitutional issue, demonstrating in front of our local court house, loudly refusing to wear masks or to comply with other restrictions, while claiming that the pandemic was some vast conspiracy.

They purported to be courageous, but to me this looked more like fear—fear of the unknown, fear of change, of economic collapse—fear of loss, pain and death. Since then, as of this

writing, our country and the world has been traumatized not only by the pandemic but by racial injustice, political upheaval and probably many more things I don’t know about yet.

Given all this, fear is a natural reaction. It’s built into animals, including human beings, for a reason. Healthy fear keeps us out of trouble and alerts us to approaching danger. Individuals lacking in this sense may tend to have short lifespans. It’s the kind of fear expressed in the proverb: “A prudent person foresees danger and takes precautions. The simpleton goes blindly on and suffers the consequences” (Proverbs 27:12, NLT). Another proverb informs us that “Fear of the Lord is the foundation of wisdom. Knowledge of the Holy One results in good judgment” (Proverbs 9:10 (NLT)).

There we have two examples of healthy, prudent fear. But like so many things, fear has a dark side. It can easily spiral out of control and become toxic. When we find ourselves claiming to be fearless, exuding bravado, obsessing over power, domination and weaponry—there’s a good chance we are driven by toxic fear. It can transform otherwise smart folks into proverbial “simpletons” who blindly blunder on and suffer the consequences. Toxic fear and anxiety are the enemies of creative problem solving and sound decision-making.

Perhaps John the Evangelist had this desperate, toxic kind of fear in mind when he wrote, “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love” (1 John 4:18).

The bottom line is that God is not a source of fear, because he doesn’t want to punish us. On the contrary, he’s the one who drives out fear! And even in these dark days with so many in the grip of toxic fear, He offers to lead us forward out of that fear with confidence, courage, faith and thankfulness—because of his perfect love. □

—Monte Wolverton