What do spiders, public speaking, and enclosed spaces all have in common? They are among the leading phobias that people have. Think of all the experiences that are missed because of fear. People who are afraid of flying may never go to another country or get a chance to visit with relatives who live far away. People afraid of crowded spaces may never go to the mall or to a county fair or go to a ballpark to watch a baseball game.

Fear can paralyze people. Fear can cripple. Fear can hinder. Fear can turn good intentions and grand plans into dead ends. In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus does not address any of the specific phobias I just mentioned, but he does deal with the fear of following - the fear of following him.

Who would ever be afraid to follow Jesus? Imagine being one of those early disciples. Imagine Jesus looking you in the eye and saying: Be on your guard. People will arrest and tell lies about you and beat you up. People will hate you and persecute you and make your life miserable - all because you are following me. Wow, painful trials, insults, suffering – all for the name of Christ.

Does that sound inviting? Does that sound appealing? Doesn’t it sound a little scary? So that fear does not cripple us in our faith walk - so that fear does not hinder our growth or lead us to inactivity - Jesus speaks very openly and pointedly about the topic of following him. He encourages us to FOLLOW WITHOUT FEAR.

First of all, we can follow without fear because we know what to expect. Jesus says: A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household!

Jesus does not want us to be surprised. A surprise is something you do not see coming. The deer darting in front of your car - 20 of your closest friends popping out from behind the furniture and yelling Happy Birthday! when you walk through the door - the doctor asking you to take a seat before he tells you about the spot that appeared on the x-rays. We get surprised because we get caught off guard. We just did not expect that to happen. Jesus tells us very plainly: Expect it! - a student is not above his teacher. In other words, a student should not expect to be treated better than the teacher. So if the world treated Jesus poorly - guess what? - expect the world to treat poorly those who follow him.

It might not make any sense. Why are people not more receptive to the Gospel? Why do so many people, even some of our close family members, fall away from God’s Word? Why don’t more people respect Christian values and morals? Because the world is hostile toward whatever comes from God. So, if the world hated Jesus, it will also hate you if you follow him. If the world tried to silence Jesus, it will also try to silence you if you speak about him. If the world claimed that Jesus was in league with the devil, it will also try to demonize you if you associate with him.

So part of following without fear is realizing that persecution and pain are sure to come. Expect it. Don’t be surprised by it. Don’t be frightened by it. Also, realize that God is on your side.

Jesus also says: So do not be afraid of them. There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What I tell you in the dark,
speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs. Do no be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

Do not be afraid of any of your enemies in the world because when it comes right down to it, they have limited power. The most they can ever do is hurt you bodily. Don’t over-concern yourself with those who may make your life slightly uncomfortable or who may hurt your feelings by saying nasty things to you or those who try to tarnish your rep or even those who might beat you up or push you down or seek to take you out.

Instead, be concerned about the One who holds your body and soul in his hands, namely, your God. His power has no limits. His might knows no boundaries. Be concerned about what he thinks. Because if he wanted to, he could crumple up your body and your soul and throw it in that eternal garbage dump.

But listen to what Jesus says about your mighty, powerful Lord: Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.

So follow without fear! Your enemies may be numerous, but God is bigger and better. Your opposition may be strong, but God is stronger. Your neighbors may hate and despise you and what you stand for, but God loves you and knows you and works all thing out for your good. And so as we follow our Savior, the song of the Psalmist serves as our marching cadence: The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?

So fearlessly we follow, we know what to expect. We know God is on our side. And we know how things will end.

Jesus says: Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven.

Just as you know what to expect in this life: hardships a plenty, uphill battles, tenacious and persistent foes, spiritual struggles day after day. You also know what you can expect when this life draws to a close. Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven.

Then and there Jesus will greet you and he will present you to his Father. Jesus will not say: Father accept them for who they are and treat them according to what they have done – that would mean doom and damnation for us. Instead he will say: Father, accept them, for their sins have been paid for and the white robe of righteousness they are wearing is the garment we gave them at their baptism. Accept them because the sins that once condemned them are nailed forever to the tree. Accept them for the devil who once persecuted them has been crushed and conquered.

So dear friends and fellow children of God, we follow Christ without fear because that is what he wants from us. He wants our words and actions to represent him in the world. He wants his light to shine through us to this sin-darkened place. People should be able to look at us and listen to us and see what Jesus is like and what love and forgiveness are. And although many dangers and persecutions, much ridicule and taunts and jeers may lie in the path before us, we can follow without fear - because we know what to expect - we know God’s on our side - and we know how sweet things will end for us. Amen!

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