



“S is for Scared”

From the message series *HALT(S): Hungry, Angry, Lonely, Tired, Scared*

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Today I conclude this message series. It used to be HALT; now it's HALTS. A little S on the end. P.S. “S” is Scared.

You might know this picture on my right over here. That's from April 3rd, 1968, the last day, the last night that Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spent on this earth. Memphis, Tennessee. His life was under siege, and yet he said – of course he recognizes that the need and the desire for longevity. Everyone wants to live a long life. But he said, “I've been to the mountaintop. I've seen the Promised Land.” He said, even on the night before he was going to be killed, “I'm not fearing any man tonight. I'm not fearing anyone.”

This person over here might not recognize him as readily, and I think that says something good about our world, although you might recognize him. This is Dennis Rader, the BTK killer, if any of you remember that, in Wichita, Kansas. BTK, self-described Bind, Torture and Kill. That's the most I will say about him because his acts are so horrific, and I don't want to talk about what he did.

After his crimes were found out, he made a cool, diffident recitation of all the awful things he had done. Everyone who heard him talk about what he did said this: “He had absolutely no fear of being caught.” He had no fear of the people, the victims who he stalked. Saints and psychos have this in common. They both know no fear. No. Psychopaths use the absence of fear to exploit and harm, and saints use the absence of fear to love and to serve.

But I'm not talking really about saints and psychos today. I'm talking about the rest of us. I don't know if there are any saints here. Probably some in the making. I hope there are no psychopaths here, certainly. But today's message is for us, those of us neither saints nor psychos. As I bring this message series, HALT, to a close, just to give you a brief recitation of what came before HALTS-- HALTS, stopping, taking that sacred pause in the midst of our lives, particularly when we're Hungry, when we're Angry, when we're Lonely and We're tired, and today, focusing on when we are Scared, when we face fear in our lives.

Now there are many spiritual teachings and many spiritual teachers about how we deal with fear in our lives; what happens when we are scared. I think next to love, probably fear ranks highest in what religions and spirituality talks about and helps us deal with. The way that some spiritual traditions, especially some spiritual teachers, especially right now, talk about fear and talk about being afraid, it's as if we could rank our spiritual maturity with our ability to be fearless, and I find that incredibly unhelpful. As if fearlessness is some mark that we could gauge ourselves. We're 100 percent fearless so we're 100 percent spiritually mature. Some mark that most of us, I think, and I raise my hand in this, ultimately miss. That's not the best way to talk about our spiritual maturity.

What I want to talk about here today is how we work with our fear. That's what makes a difference. Sylvia Boorstein is a Buddhist teacher who I respect very highly. She's kind of the Jewish grandmother of the Buddhist teacher community because literally, she is a Jewish grandmother. She talks about being at a retreat years ago where the teacher, trying to be inspirational, shared an ancient Buddhist story, about a time in which monasteries were seen as safe refuge from the hordes of Samurai swordsmen that were roaming the countryside doing all sorts of horrific damage. This particular monastery that the teacher was talking about, where a wise old abbot was the senior teacher? It was about to be overrun by this horde of swordsmen. Most of the monks, they fled off into the hills, into the mountains to keep themselves safe. Except for that wise old abbot, who, as the doors of the monastery were being broken down, sat down on his cushion and began meditating. And then the doors of the temple were flung open by the chief samurai swordsman, the most fierce and fearsome of all, who brandished his sword in front of this old abbot and said, "Do you not know I am the kind of man that when I wield my sword, everyone is afraid?" And the abbot, opening his eyes slightly from his meditation, said, "Do you not know that I am the kind of person who can be run through with your sword and show no fear at all?"

Now Sylvia Boorstein, after hearing that, felt completely demoralized. Because if that's the standard, to actually face being run through with a sword, her own death, and to show or feel no fear whatsoever? Then she was going to fail at this whole spiritual thing. And I get it, by the way. I get it. Since I've been recognizable to myself, since I've been a young teenager, I have wrestled with sometimes very acute fear, anxiety, panic disorder. I get it. If I was going to judge myself every Sunday getting up here as to whether I was completely fearless, most Sundays you wouldn't see me. That's not the way I'm built. I feel fear. If many of us are waiting to remove all fear before we can grow, most of us will be waiting our entire lives.

I think instead of focusing on how do we get freedom from fear, I want to frame that a little bit, and today talk about how we can experience greater freedom with our fear, in the presence of our fear. Knowing that S is for Scared is a letter that many of us recognize in our lives. Because the truth of the matter is that fear is at some times incredibly useful. Sometimes fear is that alarm system that goes off, even if some of us have a little too much of a hair-trigger alarm system. Sometimes that fear is a good thing that lets us know something is at stake.

I have been around leaders who sometimes show or convey no fear, and sometimes they are incredibly inspiring. Sometimes they lead us, and it led me to some great things. And sometimes they make me want to back away very slowly and get out of the room, because they don't acknowledge that sometimes danger is a part of life.

Some of you may recognize these two characters. They're the same person. Many of you have seen *Breaking Bad* on AMC. I didn't watch it the first four seasons, but friends recently got me those discs and I ate them all up in the space of about maybe four to five weeks.

Over here, the fellow with the hair, that's Walter White, and over here, the fellow without the hair, that's also Walter White. Walter White in this very dark, very effective, sounds very funny, but still very painful series. Walter White early on discovers that he has terminal cancer. He's a meek man, a chemistry teacher, very bright, but really hasn't achieved his life goals. He finds out he has terminal cancer. He starts to be concerned about his debt that he's going to leave his wife and his children, and so he decides to take all that amazing knowledge of chemistry and make the best crystal meth anyone has ever made. And he becomes in time fearsome Walter White, a man who does horrendous things. I'm not going to give it away because, if you don't mind television that sometimes is kind of dark and kind of devious, but also really a compelling story, I recommend *Breaking Bad*. My wife after the first episode said, "I'm out," and I don't blame her, actually.

This is actually one of the things that *Breaking Bad* really gets into: What does fear do for us? Or how does fear hold us back? One of the things that the story in a sly way alludes to is that it's not real growth in this life about freedom from fear at all. Because Walter White ultimately has complete freedom from fear. But he has no freedom from ego. He has chosen this path. He has, at various points throughout the story, given up more sane, more safe and more kind ways to address a situation. But he gets deeper and deeper and deeper into his life as a meth maker and a meth dealer, and he does some horrendous things.

In an early episode I think the writers of the series kind of slyly said this: Walter describes himself, "I am awake," after he cooks his first batch of meth and sells it and makes the money for it. Now if you know those words, "I am awake," there is a specific meaning to them. That's the literal translation of that word "Buddha." Buddha is not a name. It's a way of being. "I am awake." And they even give Walter White a shaved head almost like he's a monk, but here's the thing: Walter White really is not the Buddha.

There's another character that he really reminds me of; it's Nietzsche. If any of us read our Nietzsche back in school, Nietzsche was all about the will to power. Your power, your individual power to transcend the values and the virtues of anyone else's life. It is a recipe for hell and for loneliness. Nietzsche died unhappy, I believe, because his life bore the fruit of an individualistic will to power. I thought about this this past week, this absence of fear and all the harm that can come when people do not acknowledge fear.

As some of you might be aware, this month has been the 10th anniversary of the Iraq war. However we might have felt ten years ago, and some of us, I think, were right on our estimations and some of us didn't know what to believe, and some people, I think, were dead wrong. A war that has spent hundreds of millions of dollars and cost hundreds of thousands of lives, American lives and Iraqi lives, and has destabilized that region. A war, that if I could go back and rewrite it, would not have been fought.

Not too long ago I saw a little documentary called *The World According to Dick Cheney*. Now, I was never a fan of Dick Cheney, and after watching the documentary, I'm even less of a fan of Dick Cheney because regardless of even our political differences, in this documentary you know what I saw? A complete absence of fear. No regret, no fear. I do not want leaders who cannot experience fear. Because if Dick Cheney might have experienced just a little bit of fear, he might have recognized that fear was the leading edge of a responsibility to and with and for other people's lives. But he had no fear and drove this agenda that led us to war.

And yet on the other side, too much fear isn't really a good thing either. One of my favorite political thinkers (doesn't mean I agree with him; I disagree with him fairly often) is a guy named Andrew Sullivan. He's a blogger I like a lot, and he is reflecting back on why ten years ago he supported the war in Iraq, and now he feels so incredibly guilty over that support. One of the things that he identifies is that after September 11th, he was so incredibly seized by fear that his emotions were manipulated, and he did not take the time to embrace uncertainty and insecurity. And so he felt led into this rush to war, and, in fact, made the case over and over again ten years ago and now regrets it.

The positive usages of fear come down to one word, and it's so important in the spiritual life – humility. If we know what honest fear is, we will admit what we don't know. We will admit that sometimes the world is dangerous, and the word "humility" actually means close to the ground. It comes from the Latin word for dirt, dust: *humus*. Humble people have the ability to experience fear and admit what they don't know, and admit that yes, sometimes life is danger, but fear is not all of who we are, either.

I don't think the answer to dealing with our fear is to pretend that we are completely fearless. And it's also not to allow our lives to be completely overrun by fearfulness. Not fearlessness, not fearfulness. Because too often when we find ourselves in one of these states, we forget to do something, the most important aspect of life. We forget to ask questions. What's really going on here? Is it merited for me to be afraid right now? Or am I projecting my fear out? To take the central lessons from this message series, sometimes when we are fearful we cannot halt and pause and investigate what is here.

About two months ago I was picked for jury duty, something I never thought that would happen to me. I'm a minister who's married to a journalist. I thought the worst profile for being picked for jury duty, but I got picked. And then eventually the guy pled out so I never sat in that box for one day. But while we were being charged by the judge, he said, "This is what you are to decide." He didn't talk about guilt or innocence. He said, "No. Your job on the jury is to do this: You are to be finders of fact." I love those

instructions, especially when I'm afraid, to remember to be finders of fact, to ask that question, "What is going on here?" Because sometimes I know when I'm most seized by fear, or when I perceive others are not understanding the danger that other people are in, I hear people or myself making blanket condemnations or blanket judgments. The world is all this, or the situation is all this, rather than checking in with the complexity of the situation. To be finders of fact when afraid means that we make inquiry.

Some of my favorite teachers about making inquiry when we're afraid are these two creatures right here – Marlin and Nemo. Marlin, who lost his entire family, save for Nemo, and his raising up that child in the shadow of his anxiety and his fear. "What's the one thing that we know about the ocean, Nemo?" "It's not safe." "What's the one thing we know about the ocean?" "It's not safe." "What's the one thing we know about the ocean?" "It's not safe."

Of course the ocean isn't safe. Life isn't safe. But if all we say is that the ocean isn't safe or life isn't safe, how much more are we actually missing about our lives when we engage in this kind of blanket worry and spreading fear out in front of ourselves, all around ourselves? We're making a global judgment rather than checking in as finders of fact and seeing if our fear is merited here in this moment. Because right next to that fear, even if it's real, even if it's true, there might also be courage. There might also be love. There might also be other greater truths. But we engage in this blanket worry. All we see is our fear. It's if we are doing this to our lives, almost as if we are taking out our calendars and writing on that calendar, "Worry, worry, worry, worry, worry, worry, worry, worry, worry, worry, worry." Every day, each day when we give into that overwhelming fear, that's what we're doing. We're handing our will and our lives over to the god of fear, a god who will not care for us and cannot love. When we write worry and fear into all of our days, we are handing over our lives, not to our best selves.

Mark Twain didn't say this, but it's all on the Internet so we're just going to believe it. Mark Twain "said," "Some of the worst things in my life, some of the worst things that ever happened to me never happened." This is what happens when we cannot halt or pause in the midst of our fear.

This is what I encourage you to do, actually, if you're feeling that kind of fear, that kind of worry that comes creeping. Literally take out your phone or take out your calendar, wherever you put your schedule down, and write out for yourself seven days in a row, a month in a row, an entire year, "Worry, worry," and see how ridiculous that is. Because actually that's what we're doing when we allow ourselves to be completely seized by fear. By refusing to halt and draw it back to the moment, and perhaps say these simple words: "I am afraid *now*." I'm afraid *now*. I mean right now I'm not afraid, but to say if we're afraid, "I'm afraid *now*." See how that changes the experience of your fear versus "I'm afraid?" Saying, "I'm afraid *now*. I'm scared *now*." That's a way to halt and to take apart the calendar of our fear.

A most insightful of Jesus' teachings says this. He asks a question, a pointed question, and a pointed one for someone like me who's struggled with fear for most of his life. He says, "Who by worrying will add a single day to the span of their years?" Now I get all kinds of pushback on this one when I talk about it. Worrying is important! No, worrying is not all that important. Notice Jesus doesn't say planning, preparing, working. Worrying, a specific word. I think he says this because it's so important to recognize that when we stop worrying over everything, we can actually start to pay attention to the many things that are here.

And this leads into the second part of that teaching. The second part that says, "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow. Consider the birds of the air," as the teaching says, "and how your heavenly father feeds them."

Now my experience with higher power is very different. I've got a different kind of cosmology than a God who's up there playing traffic cop for all of us down below, but the teaching is still absolutely true. The gospel is wise here, because Jesus is preaching, "Look how much works in the world that we don't have to worry about or control."

I mean, just pause for a moment. Halt for a moment right now and think about all the things that had to go right for you to be here. I know some of us are in pain and I know some of us are in distress. And I know some of us are in despair 'cause that's just life. But let's pause for a moment and think all the things that had to go right for you to be here right now. It's not that we should dismiss that things fall apart, especially when things fall apart and injure our lives or the lives of our brothers and our sisters. We should pay attention. We shouldn't go through life with rose-colored glasses. But at the same time, if we halt and we pause, we see the things. Yes, they fall apart, but also more often than not things fall together.

If we can recognize how often things fall together and come together, we might start to change our relationship with fear or being scared. And we might shift if we are worried from worrying about all we might lose, as if we started life on day one with 100 percent and nothing but life is our plate going down, down, down, down, down.

If we shift from that mindset we might see that instead of focusing on all we might lose, we can focus on all we have to give, all the many good things in our life that are bigger than our fear.

Not too long ago I was talking with a very old friend of mine, and they were talking about trouble in their marriage, and I heard a lot of fear. Someone I've known most of my life. Heard a lot of anxiety and fear, and finally I just asked, "What are you afraid of?" And my friend said of their spouse, "I'm afraid that we don't know each other anymore," and as my friend said this, their energy just kind of settled down and that fear stopped and some quietness came into their voice. See, because alongside that fear there was also great love and a tremendous desire to know the person that they love.

Now sometimes this is just the way life is 'cause this was over a month ago when I talked to my friend. Two weeks ago they told me that the day after they admitted that they felt like they didn't know their spouse anymore, that their spouse revealed to them a big secret that the spouse had been carrying around. Nothing that actually was going to ruin their lives, but something that made their lives more clear. The revelation of this thing that the spouse had been hiding, it didn't make it all okay and it didn't mean everything was fine, but it meant they could halt. It meant they could pay attention to each other. It meant that exactly what my friend articulated came true; that they knew each other again, and knowing each other they could remember how much they loved each other.

This is what HALT or HALTS P.S. is all about – stopping and seeing. Humbly, carefully finding the facts of our lives over and over and over again so that we just don't race on through our lives fearfully, hungrily, angrily, lonely or tired.

This whole message series came to me on that first day of jury duty when I was like, "WTF, I just got selected?" And I figured that's why it's so important when you're on a jury to do exactly what the judge said because this is important. This is a person's guilt or innocence. This is a person's freedom at stake.

When we don't halt in our own lives, it's the same lesson. When we don't learn to take the "sacred pause," as Tara Brach says, it's the same lesson. We are limiting our time and our space and our ability to be free people. And when I say free, free to love. Free to care. Free to connect. Free to be compassionate. Free, as we say, to live fully, love generously and be who we are called to be. That's right from our DNA, and this is how we talk about discovering what divinity really is for us.

So at the halt, at the end, not just a pause, but now the conclusion of this message series, may we all take a breath right now. And breathe out, too, and pause. Here we are. Here you are. Here we are together, knowing this ability to pause right here in our lives, and we all recognize that we have, indeed, a wonderful, even eternal limitless capacity to love, to care, to connect, but first we have to stop and decide who we really are and who we really want to be. Let's pause. Amen. And may you live in blessing.

Let's pause for some prayer now, too. Oh, God of the breath in our lungs, of spirit that surrounds us, enters us, leaves us, spirit that is us. May we be here now, no longer caught in the web tangled of what has been. No longer projecting ourselves fearfully, fantastically, fretfully into the future. And we stop for a moment. Life will continue to form; life will continue to grow. May we be here. May we breathe now, and may we be free. Amen.