

**NAME**

With, Not In.mp3

**DATE**

November 17, 2020

**DURATION**

34m 24s

**START OF TRANSCRIPT****[00:00:05]**

Good morning, Wellspring's. As I was getting ready to preach today, a mourning dove, a sweet, chunky, fat, fluffy little mourning dove landed on my roof deck and is keeping me company. And you'll hear a story later in the message that helps you appreciate why I'm so happy about that. Believe it or not, it's November. It's mid-November. And last week, Reverend Ken began our holiday message series here at Wellspring's called How to Be Afraid. He kicked it off by reminding us that we should always be talking and thinking about the when of fear, not the whiff of fear. Right. It's when, not if we are afraid, been even talked about that a little bit this morning, as much as we might wish we could. Fear is not something we can eradicate. Fear is an emotion like every other emotion. It is part of the landscape of our lives, just like sadness, just like delight, just like frustration or anger or fear is a feeling that we evolved for a purpose.

**[00:01:22]**

It's a feeling for us to accept.

**[00:01:27]**

And like Ken talked about last week, denying our fear, just like denying any emotion is actually dangerous for us. Denying our fear is why people sometimes stop listening to themselves to their own helpful internal threat system. And it's sometimes why we stop listening to each other also.

**[00:01:51]**

And so this week, I want to talk a little bit more specifically about the spiritual resources that we have for living with alongside our fear when it shows up, we can live with our fear without being in it.

**[00:02:12]**

And boy, is that a phrase we've heard a million times in twenty twenty. Right. We can't live in fear. Ever since the pandemic began back in March, we've heard that. Maybe we've said it right. Well, we can't live in fear or I refuse to live in fear. And God, I have wished ever since the beginning of this pandemic that we could just nuance that a little bit. That phrase, that impulse that we have to say we can't or we refuse to live in fear because I get it. Living in fear, no, that's something that no one deserves to have to do to be in fear in sounds like we are surrounded on all sides, right? That there's no way out. That's no way to live for sure.

**[00:03:08]**

But are those two extremes of being consumed by fear or being free from or refusing or releasing fear, or are they only our only options really do we have to be in our fear or completely apart from it, denying it? Or is there another way to relate to that universal experience?

**[00:03:42]**

The basics of any mindfulness practice, the spiritual practice that we most often lean into here at Wellspring's, we make space for silence in every single Sunday service. That practice of mindfulness reminds us that with care and quiet attention, we can learn to see and observe our fears. Just like we can with any other emotion or reaction that we might feel, instead of letting it consume us, on the one hand being in it or needing to turn and run away from it, on the other, we can be with it. When we practice right in those moments, we can trust that fear is just a feeling. When we are sitting at home on our meditation cushion, on our pillow, on the floor, on our couch, in the quiet, we are safe.

**[00:04:44]**

In that moment in our bodies, we are safe. And we can feel and learn about our fear.

**[00:04:56]**

Any kind of mindful practice, whether it's meditation or movement, any practice that allows us to observe our experience with care and focused attention in those kinds of practices, we can allow fear to be with us the same

way we might allow grief or sadness or uncertainty or joy.

**[00:05:24]**

Just allowing it to be present and real, but not in control. Not consuming our every move.

**[00:05:34]**

Our coexistence with fear, listening to what it has to teach us without letting it completely hijack our brains and our bodies, that kind of coexistence, that is what real strength and freedom with fear.

**[00:05:51]**

Can feel like.

**[00:05:56]**

It's a lesson that feels particularly apt to me to remember this weekend as just last week we observed a national holiday.

**[00:06:06]**

Veterans Day.

**[00:06:09]**

Veterans, the people who've served in our armed forces, they know what it means to experience and to act alongside their fears, very real fears that they might never see their families again.

**[00:06:29]**

Fears of failing in their mission and having to pay the price fears at the same time maybe of succeeding and in doing so, being asked to take another person's life. Fears of what they might see and experience while they serve and sometimes fears of the very memories that they carry inside are veterans know what it means to feel fear and to act anyway.

**[00:07:01]**

I know it might feel like the twenty twenty election was about six years ago at that point. At this point, that's how it feels to me. But it's only been eight days if you're watching this on Sunday. It's only been eight days since the results were called last weekend. And this week I have been aware in a whole new way of some of my own fears about the fragility of our democracy in this country and about how much I simply don't know. About how things could be otherwise.

**[00:07:38]**

If we were ever unable to trust that our democratic institutions will hold, I recognize that after nearly 40 years alive on this Earth, I find it hard to even imagine what it would actually be like for me to live in an undemocratic society.

**[00:07:53]**

And again, I know that that innocence on my part is in large part thanks to the service of our nation's veterans, but I've also been aware this past week of all the other key roles that people play, all of the little choices that we make that have to go right for our democracy to be protected and strong in this country.

**[00:08:21]**

There are civil servants at every level who make countless little choices to put public good ahead of personal preference that protect our democracy.

**[00:08:34]**

There are of the dozens of you of us here at Wellspring's who showed up and volunteered last week as poll workers and poll watchers or the people who made calls and sent text messages and postcards to keep that literal machinery of a free and fair election running that took work by many, many hands. There's the journalists and the photographers who covered the events of this past week so that I could watch it 24/7 on TV or scroll through it on my phone so that I could know and we could know anything beyond what's happening in our own backyard.

**[00:09:11]**

They are part of protecting our democracy to. And there are the activists who are still out there every day demanding that we become more democratic and more honest about who our democratic institutions truly represent and include.

**[00:09:32]**

All of these people have a role in this thing.

**[00:09:38]**

And I feel genuinely new waves of gratitude this year for all that each of these people does to make sure that every voice and vote continues to count in our country.

**[00:09:52]**

But right alongside this gratitude, this newfound gratitude is some newfound fear for me, because seeing how all of

this is really up to these many hands, all of these individuals and the small choices that they make, that probably don't seem that big in the moment, it makes me realize how fragile this is.

**[00:10:18]**

And how precious.

**[00:10:22]**

Democratic institutions is quite a phrase, right? What do you picture when you hear that democratic institutions? It sounds like something literally rock solid, right? It sounds like it is made of poured concrete or big stone. Right.

**[00:10:37]**

Marble statues, all of these symbols that we have literally built around us to help us feel like these norms of our democracy are immovable and long standing.

**[00:10:50]**

Right. These democratic institutions are covered in Petina and ivy vines right there. So all that other stuff has literally started growing on them.

**[00:11:01]**

But when you think about it, right, gosh, all those buildings were built. They were built by laborers. Some of them were built by slaves, people enslaved by this country. The newer ones were built by bricklayers and electricians, workers.

**[00:11:22]**

They're cleaned by janitors at night, those vines that grow on those buildings are pruned and watered by groundskeepers and the papers inside are pushed by human beings.

**[00:11:38]**

All of our institutions are kept moving by people, vulnerable, fragile people.

**[00:11:49]**

Us.

**[00:11:54]**

And in a week like this one, that vulnerability when it comes home to roost, for me, that is a little scary.

**[00:12:04]**

For you, maybe it's the aftermath of the election and watching things unfold this past week, maybe unlike you've ever seen them unfold before, or maybe it's something else for you. God knows we've had a lot of practice opportunities with our fears this year.

**[00:12:26]**

Maybe you're starting to recognize this year after all of that practice, what your own go to patterns are for coping with fear.

**[00:12:38]**

Do you tend to one of those two extremes, maybe?

**[00:12:43]**

Do you find that it's easy for you to be in fear, to be consumed by it, just doom scrolling, constantly hooked in and unable to detach for even a moment? Or maybe do you go to the other extreme to cope, are you the one who's telling other people who are scared that they are overreacting and that everything is going to be fine?

**[00:13:11]**

God, is there another option? Please, one that could help us get out of the mess, the many messes that we are in.

**[00:13:28]**

I think that there is I think there is more than one other option, and I do think that our faith, our mission, our vision of who we can be in this community is part of that. The meditation teacher, Sharon Salzberg, wrote a article way back in twenty fifteen called When Fear Arises, where she talks specifically about that experience for her.

**[00:14:10]**

And she acknowledges this expert meditation teacher who does this for a living, who writes books about it, she acknowledges that fear is not one of the easier feelings to allow in ourselves for good reason.

**[00:14:26]**

But she says, you know, because it's so hard to be with.

**[00:14:31]**

She says, I wonder sometimes how much destructive action takes place because we find we can't easily just sit and know that we feel afraid.

**[00:14:44]**

To avoid the feeling of fear, she says, we reach for anything that will give us a sense of power, however fleeting the sense of power might be and however destructive the act that we take.

**[00:15:03]**

And it's something she says, that has great implications not just for our personal lives, but for the societies that we create.

**[00:15:15]**

Sharon Salzberg says that one of the interesting things she's discovered about her own fear is that despite that common phrase, she says that, you know, we're afraid of the unknown, that that sort of clichéd idea, that that's what we're most scared of. She says, you know what? By and large, that's not when I feel most afraid. She says, When I look directly at my fear and really spend time getting to know it without adding a whole bunch of other stuff, just the fear, she says, it's not the unknown that scares me, I'm afraid, when I think I do know and that it's going to be really bad.

**[00:15:54]**

It's not the unknown itself. It's what the unknown brings up for her.

**[00:16:02]**

It's the way that that unknown leads her to start to tell a story about how bad it's going to be.

**[00:16:12]**

The stories I tell myself, she says, intensify and extend the fear, and when I remind myself that actually I don't know how something will end up, I feel a sense of space.

**[00:16:27]**

I feel a sense, she says of groundedness. When I can remind myself, hey, I don't know.

**[00:16:37]**

Just those three words. I don't know.

**[00:16:44]**

When I can separate those two things out, the imagine bad scenarios and the simple curiosity of you know what?

**[00:16:51]**

I don't know. It brings a lot of relief.

**[00:16:57]**

And it's a tool that I know I can use now when I feel fear arising, if I remember, she says, to let go of the stories in the add ons and hang out for just a moment with what's happening to me, to my own body in my own house.

**[00:17:14]**

There's space there. And there can be peace there, even in the presence of your.

**[00:17:23]**

Not a piece that requires us to say nothing bad is ever going to happen or I don't believe that this threat is real.

**[00:17:33]**

But a piece that reminds us we don't know what's going to happen next and a peace that lets us meet the challenges that are real from that grounded place inside that point of connection with our values and with our worth and with the communities that matter, the people that matter most to us.

**[00:17:58]**

From there, we choose how we respond with a new kind of clarity.

**[00:18:06]**

I'll give you a very low stakes example to illustrate this. I don't like snakes, or I should say that more honestly, I am afraid of snakes, anybody else out there.

**[00:18:23]**

Now, I know some of you are like Team Snake, right? Some of you have pet snakes in your home. No, thank you. I will not be doing that in my house.

**[00:18:33]**

But recently I was confronted with a snake. I was out on a walk with my mom and my stepdad in St. Louis Garden

over in Vilanova on one of those nice days that we had in October, and then right in front of us all of a sudden as we were walking on the path was a snake.

**[00:18:53]**

A steak, a real steak, right, think about that in front of you, a real thing that you are afraid of. This is not a practice.

**[00:19:00]**

It's happening. It's on. And that's what happened in my head.

**[00:19:07]**

Almost imperceptibly, fast, almost in the same instant, right? The thought there's a snake in front of me becomes snakes are dangerous, becomes I'm in danger, becomes run, or at least back away. Fight, right. Fight flight or freeze. One of those options, that instinctual lizard brain, that amygdala response that we have adapted for physical danger. But I got to see what happens when we can learn to be with our fears in that moment. Because in this case, even though it's taken me about 37 years and a lot of panic Googling after encounters just like this one, I have finally learned to tell the difference, the basic difference between different kinds of snakes. And so while I stood there and let myself make just enough space around the fear to ask what is really happening, what is really in front of me, what don't I know? A less reptilian part of my brain showed up and said, Lee, take a deep breath. That is a garter snake.

**[00:20:30]**

That is exactly the kind of snake that cannot hurt you. And how did my affect toward the whole experience change?

**[00:20:42]**

Don't get me wrong, personally, I still didn't want to pick up that snake and cuddle it, OK, but when I gave it that space, I could see that he was frozen in fear of us.

**[00:20:56]**

And what arose then was that I started talking to him almost like he was one of those sweet, little fat, cute, fluffy friends, the kind of animal that personally, for whatever reason, I'm not afraid of at all.

**[00:21:08]**

And then I had that impulse I get whenever I see something beautiful and unusual in nature, of course, to take out my phone and take a picture of it, which I did.

**[00:21:20]**

Here's the video of my little snake friend. Yeah, that it's a whole other kind of response welled up inside me watching him that was not necessarily affectionate, like I said, but I definitely was fascinated with the way he moved.

**[00:21:50]**

And again, still not quite wanting to be close to him, but that's OK. Where there had once been fear, there was now appreciation and even more some genuine positive wishes for this little being. Actual honest lovingkindness. May you be well, may you be safe from harm. And may I be well and safe from harm too.

**[00:22:26]**

I see so many people these days, including myself sometimes, who are caught up in fear.

**[00:22:36]**

And instead of learning to be with those fears and make the wise and kind choices, sometimes the fear feels like it just needs to be torn off, pushed away at all costs. But in my silly little snake example, imagine what that means, what that looks like. It could be a fight response that is needless and harmful. God forbid I would have stomped on that poor, defenseless animal the way we do sometimes with spiders, with cockroaches. In this case, a misguided and unnecessary attempt. To protect myself out of the fear that I felt. I would have hated to do that. Or maybe in my example. Not being able to be with fear looks like an unskillful kind of denial. I'm not afraid. No snake can hurt me. Without actually stopping to learn.

**[00:23:53]**

And that unskillful denial maybe would have worked with my little garter snake friend, but not for the next snake maybe, or I may teach somebody else to get the wrong idea about snakes if I go around saying that, they can't hurt me at all.

**[00:24:12]**

If we don't sit with our fear and our discomfort long enough to learn. We'll never be able to tell the difference. Between our fear response. And the actual threats that are real in the world.

**[00:24:32]**

There are two different things.

**[00:24:36]**

And if we cannot tell the difference between them.

**[00:24:39]**

We only create more harm. Arming ourselves or each other. Out of fear.

**[00:24:53]**

Do you remember back in March when we were all so scared all the time? Back when I was washing my bell peppers from the grocery store with soap and when I bleached my floors, true story because my landlord shoes touched them for a couple of minutes. You probably have your own examples.

**[00:25:11]**

We needed time to learn. We needed to give ourselves permission to learn. And that's OK.

**[00:25:19]**

That's normal, especially when a threat is new and unfamiliar. Hopefully all we do is try not to cause cause harm as we figure out what's safe.

**[00:25:33]**

I hope my stomach lining has forgiven me for the soapy veggies and that that was the worst harm that I caused.

**[00:25:43]**

Taking that time to learn about our fears is OK, but it's not OK when our fears are manipulated dishonestly.

**[00:25:58]**

That's called abuse when someone creates a threat or creates a reason for you to be afraid that you'll go along with what they want. Yeah, that is called manipulation and abuse.

**[00:26:15]**

And we see that happening to. Since March. Since long before.

**[00:26:24]**

It's what makes this business of being with our fears even more complicated.

**[00:26:31]**

They don't happen in a vacuum.

**[00:26:36]**

Manipulation and abuse are the fault of the abuser.

**[00:26:40]**

Full stop. It's not our fault. If we buy in to that kind of fear.

**[00:26:51]**

And as a collective, when we learn to work with our fears. It can make us a lot less susceptible to those people who will try to trap us in our fears.

**[00:27:07]**

This kind of work is not only personally helpful, it is collectively strengthening and empowering.

**[00:27:18]**

We have seen that there are people in this world who will try to hijack a whole population that's having an honest and normal fear response and to use our fear response to swing us this way or that. That's exactly how public actors with bad intentions whip us up into a frenzy and wedge us apart.

**[00:27:42]**

I'll never forget how I felt the moment I picked up my phone this spring and saw for the first time a live feed of protests at the statehouse in Harrisburg, calling the pandemic a hoax. Honestly, that was the hardest moment of these last eight months for me.

**[00:28:04]**

Because we actually had a chance to unite in this polarized country of ours against a common enemy that wasn't even human, we didn't have to dehumanize anyone to come together and fight against this virus. And it could have been such a galvanizing, unifying force. And instead, it was explicitly used to create division.

**[00:28:28]**

And we are living with the consequences now.

**[00:28:37]**

There is more at stake. And working with our fears and just our peace of mind.

**[00:28:44]**

Because if we cannot learn to be skillful with our fears, they can and we have seen in so many ways that they will be used against us.

**[00:28:54]**

In the politics of racial resentment, in the politics around anyone who is different from me or you from us in any way in drumming up support for foreign wars and sending our military off sometimes to fight unjust fights.

**[00:29:13]**

And in our response to this key moment in our history where our willingness to sacrifice for ourselves and each other and learn to live with this valid fear that we face of the coronavirus can make the difference this winter for thousands between life and death.

**[00:29:38]**

That wisdom of mindfulness. Those teachings that Sharon Salzberg and so many others have quoted about staying with the present moment asks us to remember when we feel these very real fears that we don't know the outcome.

**[00:30:01]**

We don't know because it hasn't happened yet.

**[00:30:05]**

Because what happens will depend on you and me and us, what happens will be a product of choices and actions yet to be taken.

**[00:30:20]**

That's how time works. That's how history unfolds.

**[00:30:26]**

All of those human beings pushing papers and writing stories and gardening and cleaning up buildings.

**[00:30:35]**

All of these human beings make choices.

**[00:30:41]**

We are not helpless.

**[00:30:44]**

Because there is always something to do and some choice to make that even in a small way, moves us closer, brings us closer together.

**[00:30:55]**

Instead of wedging us apart.

**[00:30:58]**

Some choice. That protects more of us.

**[00:31:06]**

Learning to tolerate our fear and our vulnerability is political. In the literal sense of the word that it helps us hold on to our power.

**[00:31:18]**

In the moment.

**[00:31:22]**

So now no one wants to live in fear, and I hope we don't.

**[00:31:27]**

But yes, when we live with our fear alongside it.

**[00:31:33]**

It can empower us to stick together.

**[00:31:37]**

And to fight whatever the real enemy is out there, which in our faith is never a person, it may be an ideology. It may be a harmful system that has us in its grips or it may be a virus, but may we remember as we move through these next few months that the enemy we fear is not each other?

**[00:32:06]**

Amen and May you live in blessing.

**[00:32:13]**

Take a moment to take a deep breath, maybe let your eyes closed and join me in the spirit of prayer.

**[00:32:24]**

God of our hearts.

**[00:32:31]**

Help us to remember this week, next week, through all of the changes that might be coming in our personal lives and in our big communal life in this place that we call America.

**[00:32:51]**

Help us always to remember to try to see a third possibility, a fourth possibility, the creative possibilities out there, that there is another choice, that we don't have to hurt each other out of our fear. May we find that grounded space within ourselves? To collect ourselves as we fall apart. May we be that space for each other, offering simple presence, offering someone to listen when we are scared and like a kind of parent or older sibling, like a loving figure who has seen a few things and can teach us. May we hear that voice of the spirit of the collective of God, of our own deepest hearts yearning, that voice that reminds us. We can do this. We can take care of ourselves and each other, we can find a way, we can always find a way. For the prayers I've spoken and for the prayers that each of these people carries on their hearts this morning, we say amen.

**END OF TRANSCRIPT**



Automated transcription by Sonix  
[www.sonix.ai](http://www.sonix.ai)