I don’t even like to look at the commercials for the TV program “Fear Factor.” I know the settings are artificial but there is just something about those scenes that makes me want to close my eyes.

Real fear is something else. When it comes into our lives we can’t simply hit “mute” or turn to another channel. There’s nothing artificial about real fear.

I will never forget one of my first encounters with real fear. It was a beautiful spring day in 1963. My high school classmate, Jimmy Spittler, had just finished making his year-long wood-shop project – a beautiful cedar chest. To help him take it home, my brother and I volunteered the use of our 1950 Ford pickup truck.

Together we loaded it up in the back of Cornwall High School and began driving toward his home. About a mile from school was an intersection with cross traffic coming down a long hill just a few miles from the Pennsylvania Turnpike. Cars were known to fly through that stop sign.

My brother was driving as we neared that fateful intersection. Jimmy was in the middle and I was by the window. We thought the large family car on our left was going to stop so we kept driving.

All of a sudden that vehicle slammed into the broadside of our half-ton pickup truck with the force of a speeding freight train. Like a confused clock we spun counter-clockwise as the car careened in the opposite direction.

We were stunned. The absolute shock and fear smothered us. Yes, fear really can take your breath away. Everything moves in slow motion. Your mind stops and starts and stops and starts. When you breathe, fear fills your nostrils with an unforgettable odor. Over forty years later I can still smell it.

If we had been driving a split-second slower our cab would have been the bullseye and only God knows if any of us would have survived. Fortunately, the car hit the bed of the truck. Unfortunately, the force sheared off the lid and one-third of the cedar chest.

My brother, Ken, and I will never forget Jimmy’s remark as our damaged truck with its damaged cargo came to a spinning stop. Jimmy turned around, looked out the back window and cried out, “Oh no, my cedar chest.” We later smiled at his outburst over his year-long project when all of us could have been killed.

There are many kinds of fears. The dictionary has a long list of “phobias”: Claustrophobia (fear of closed places); Acrophobia (fear of heights); Hydrophobia (fear of water); Porphyrophobia
(fear of the color purple); Phobophobia (fear of being afraid); Cyclophobia (fear of bicycles); Aulophobia (fear of fruits); and many more.

Some fears are life-limiting rather than life-threatening. As Gandhi once said, “The trouble is that we often die many times before death takes us.” My fear of public speaking would fit in that category. Even to this day I have a tendency to over-prepare as a way of compensating for my glossophobia.

Fear can even invade the Christmas season. In the first Christmas Joseph, Mary, Zechariah and the shepherds encountered profound fear. They remind us that even when good things take place fear may be present. Each one received the same message, “Fear Not.”

And as Lloyd Douglas observed, “If a man harbors any sort of fear, it percolates through all thinking, damages his personality and makes him landlord to a ghost.”

Think about it.

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