

## Welcome

Anyone who has been around me long knows I LOVE Star Trek. Saturday afternoons as a young child often included watching Spock, Kirk, McCoy, Scotty, Uhura, Sulu, and Chekov save the day as their five-year mission took them where no man, and no one (at least no one they knew) had gone before. If you come to our home, you'll find various Star Trek captains on coffee mugs, a tri-dimensional chess set, too many fan fiction novels to count, and at Christmas, our tree is filled with various Star Trek themed ornaments – even a Tribble! It doesn't end there -- our daughter, Hannah, had ST:TNG Captain's onesie for her first Halloween costume. I have seen every episode of every series multiple times, as well as every movie. I am not alone in this love of Star Trek. Millions of people around the world are "trekkies" or "trekkers" depending on when you joined the fandom. Star Trek has permeated pop culture, including our phones – check out your emojis and you'll find one for the Vulcan greeting of "Live long and prosper". Its influence has even reached outer space -- Mae Jemison, NASA's first Black female astronaut was inspired to become an astronaut by Nichelle Nichols' ground breaking role as Lt. Uhura. All of this and more from a TV show that barely made it three years on network television.

Why does this fictional world capture our imaginations? Why do we quote imaginary Captains and long to "boldly go"? Is there truth in the idea that "All I Needed to Know in Life I Learned from Watching Star Trek"? Maybe not everything we need to know, but the longevity and diversity of Star Trek are a great indication that the stories told within its universe offer truths that resonate widely. Today we are going to spend some time looking at the two most recent additions to the Star Trek universe – Picard and Discovery. Season 1 of Picard and the second half of season 2 and all of season 3 of Discovery aired during the pandemic. While (spoiler) all of the aforementioned seasons take place in very different time periods in the StarTrek Universe, there is a common theme interwoven in both series: fear destroys and love builds.

But before we "boldly go" there, let's begin by worshipping the God who IS love, and whose love gives us abundant life!

## Message

Welcome to CataVision! This summer, we've explored some of our most beloved television shows to practice listening well and creating spiritual conversations.

We engaged with popular shows -- which indicates they resonate with us so we connect with them on both a personal and cultural level. We spent the summer asking "Why?" What message in these shows is resonating? And how do we engage that message in a faith-filled way?

We began with WandaVision, a show about learning to see past our self-deceptions and be honest with ourselves. Reality TV helped us understand our need for authenticity. Then we spent a couple of weeks in Heaven and Hell with The Good Place and Lucifer. Sonya Brown

took us into the Upside Down, where we saw that it's not quite as scary as *Stranger Things* makes it out to be. And last week, she and *The Falcon* and the *Winter soldier* reminded us that the power and meaning of symbols come from the actions of the women and men who wield them; how Jesus turned a Roman symbol of fear and death into a symbol of God's mercy, love, grace, and gift of eternal life; and how our actions as Christians impact the way the cross of Jesus is perceived today. *Breaking Bad* helped us recognize our capacity for sin and need for Jesus. *The Mandalorian* showed us how to reject legalism for religion grounded in love, while *Ted Lasso* demonstrated the power of kindness.

Today, we are going to visit three centuries, multiple universes, and various planets with the two most recent additions to the *Star Trek* Universe – *Discovery* and *Picard*. *Discovery* follows Michael Burnham, a rising star who fell hard from grace when her fear-driven actions ignited a war and killed her captain and parent figure, Captain Philippa Georgiou. In the middle of season 2 (which was in progress when the pandemic hit), CBS launched *Picard* which follows retired Admiral Jean Luc Picard as he and his mis-mash compatriots race to do what Jean Luc does best – find the truth and confront the fear that threatens to destroy the universe. These shows can and do stand on their own. However, with the timing of *Picard's* release and the commonalities between storylines I couldn't resist the opportunity to talk about both.

But first, let's talk about fear. According to Merriam-Webster fear is:

**1 a.** an unpleasant often strong emotion caused by anticipation or awareness of danger

**1 b**   **(1):** an instance of this emotion

**(2):** a state marked by this emotion

According to The American Psychological Association, fear is “a basic, intense emotion aroused by the detection of imminent threat, involving an immediate alarm reaction that mobilizes the organism by triggering a set of physiological changes. These include rapid heartbeat, redirection of blood flow away from the periphery toward the gut, tensing of the muscles, and a general mobilization of the organism to take action (see [fear response](#); [fight-or-flight response](#)).

So, fear is:

- 1) Natural
- 2) Instinctual (primitive)
- 3) Reactionary
- 4) An emotion
- 5) A state that causes almost involuntary action

Fear is the first emotion ascribed to a human in Genesis – When Adam and Eve are confronted by God after they eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Adam explains to God why they hid – “He (Adam) answered, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.” Genesis 3:10. So, the first fight or flight response was flight – hiding from God. Let's look at the second response to fear. “And he (God) said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?” The man

said, “The woman you put here with me – she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it,” Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this you have done?”, The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.” Genesis 3:11-13. First emotion, fear. First response, hide, second response – blame someone else to justify your actions. Adam and Eve had never known fear before. They had no knowledge of death and therefore, no need to fear it. They sinned and voila – fear was born! Sin brings death and death threatens our existence. Fear warns us of threats, risks, danger that could end our existence.

Fast forward to the year 2255 in the Star Trek Universe and we find that sentient beings of every race and creed are STILL dealing with fear. Death is still around. Sin (evil) still exists. Trauma happens, and even the brightest in StarFleet can allow fear to overtake them. Michael Burnham is the first officer of The USS Shenzhou under the command of Captain Phillipa Georgiou. Burnham is intelligent. She is logical (far more than your average human, she was raised on Vulcan after all). She is well trained. She is experienced. None of this keeps her from reacting out of fear. She can see the danger. She knows she is supposed to follow her captain’s orders. She loves her captain. She loves her crew. She loves Starfleet. But, in the heat of the moment, in her fight or flight instinctive response, she throws everything away and REACTS to the danger she knows is there. She mutinies. She betrays her captain. She betrays her oath. She is the match that ignites the war with the Klingons and must witness the brutal murder of her captain, knowing her actions were the cause. Burnham chose to allow fear to control her.

Burnham reminds me of another well-meaning “2<sup>nd</sup> in command” – Peter. Peter and the other disciples followed Jesus for three years. Peter is the one who boldly declares that Jesus is “The Christ, the Son of God” when the rest of the disciples were still hemming and hawing. Almost in the same breath, Peter tells Jesus he will not allow Jesus to follow God’s plan to his death on the cross. Death threatened Peter’s idea of who Jesus was supposed to be. His reaction is on the fight side of “fight or flight”. Jesus immediately chastises Peter for this. You would think Peter would have another “ah ha” moment, but we know he still didn’t get it. When the soldiers came to arrest Jesus, what did Peter do in his fear – grabbed a sword and cut off a soldier’s ear! Peter’s irrational, instinctive fear response could have caused an instantaneous bloodbath much like Michael’s mutinous actions. But Jesus, acting in love, even as he KNEW he was facing death, heals the soldier's ear. Same situation. Two paths – fear or love.

Let’s jump for a minute from young Michael Burnham to seasoned, respected, now retired Admiral Jean Luc Picard in the year 2399. In Picard we quickly learn that fear has driven not just individuals, but entire planets and multiworld government systems to unspeakable acts of violence and destruction. The consequences of these reactions to cataclysmic events both real and prophesied reverberate through the lives of each character. Fear doesn’t just overwhelm individuals, but entire populations. Fear’s fight or flight reaction makes it easier to justify any means necessary to eliminate or escape the threat. Fear allows us to label individuals or even entire groups as “other”. Once they are “other”, they can be seen as “less than”, expendable, sub-human. We no longer see them as our neighbors. How we treat others speaks more loudly about us than them.

Remember what two commands sum up the law and the prophets – Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and love your neighbor as yourself. In Luke 10, a legal expert tries to test Jesus, asking him what must be done to inherit eternal life. Jesus responds to his question with a pair of questions – “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” After summarizing – love God and love your neighbor -- and receiving confirmation from Jesus that this is the right answer, the legal expert gets a little antsy and wants a loophole. He asks Jesus – “And who is my neighbor”? I can just imagine his list of “others” that don’t count, and so can Jesus. So, he proceeds to tell the parable of the Good Samaritan. The very title includes one of the man’s key “others” – Samaritans! The story goes like this: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’ “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.” Luke 10:30-37

Go and act in love and mercy to everyone. There are no others, only neighbors to be loved as we love ourselves. Fear of what the world will think about us must not keep us from acting in love. Fear of what might happen to us must not keep us from acting in love. Fear of the cost must not keep us from acting in love.

Fear destroys, love builds. Fear reacts, love responds. Fear is primal, love is a choice. The third season of Discovery explores the cost of fear unchecked, fear allowed to spawn more fear, and fear wielded as a weapon, both intentionally and accidentally. The trajectory of living in fear we saw in Picard has continued far in the future -- about 700 years -- as Burnham and the crew of Discovery find their corner of the universe in chaos. The United Federation of Planets and Starfleet are shadows of their former selves. Economic, political, social, and moral systems are in tatters. Faced with their new reality, Burnham and her compatriots must remind everyone they interact with that giving into fear instead of leading with mercy, love, and hope is not the right path. Choosing to move past fear, choosing to value others, choosing to search for the truth is the only way through what is by that time a 100+ year old problem. Those in charge of Starfleet have turned inward. The Vulcans have removed themselves from the equation, fearful that they who hold science and logic sacred above all else may have failed the world and caused the catastrophe. Hoarding resources is the norm and a warlord has stepped in to fill the power vacuum, controlling and terrorizing countless worlds. Fear is the weapon holding the universe hostage.

It can feel like fear is holding all of us hostage. Watch the news, any channel, and fear mongering is the order of the day. We are so busy reacting to every threat – real or imagined that it can seem we have forgotten how to do anything but attack or cower.

We are not the first nor will we be the last people to live in a perilous world. As Paul's execution drew closer, he wrote words of encouragement to his friend and student, Timothy. Knowing that his own situation was impacting Timothy, Paul's second letter reminds Timothy that "God did not give us a spirit of fear and timidity, but a spirit of power, of love, and of self-discipline. 2 Timothy 1:7. Paul was imprisoned, waiting to be executed by Rome. There would be no escape. Rather than rail against the unfairness, he reminded Timothy that the fear, no matter how natural or understandable, was not from God. Power, love, and self-discipline, those are from God. This was not a call to overthrow Rome, but to stand up and boldly proclaim the good news of Jesus - even when things were frightening. Fear did not have to rule.

For about 18 months now, our world has been upside down. There are real threats to our health, our finances, our families, our jobs, our homes. Let's start with the elephant in the room. Covid-19 has killed over 612,000 Americans and more than 4 million people around the world. Many of us lost our jobs as a result of the pandemic. Lost income impacts our families, our church and others we support. Every day there are natural disasters that we cannot control. There are car crashes and plane crashes, diseases, accidents, shootings, the list of things that could "get us" is long and varied. There are also perceived threats as the world continues to change around us. New ideas, new voices, new information sometimes challenge our our idea of who we are as individuals, as communities, as a nation. When our identity is challenged, we feel threatened just as if someone was threatening physical harm. It feels real -- just as real as Peter felt when the Roman guards came, as Michael Burnham felt when she saw the Klingons, as the religious elite felt whenever Jesus arrived on the scene. Because it feels real, our fear responses kick in. We look for security, seeking people who say things that make us feel more secure. Sometimes these people use our fear against us, to manipulate us, just like the religious elite manipulated the masses into crucifying Jesus. Our fear becomes a weapon, wielded against the "other".

What are we to do when these fears and threats, real, perceived, imagined, or otherwise present themselves? We have to make a choice. Will we react in fear -- lashing out, turning neighbors into "the other", making errors in judgment and refusing to listen or adapt as we allow our primal fight or flight response take over -- or will we respond in love. Will we choose instead to stop and listen: to act like Jesus and bring peace and healing even when the threat is real, to learn from our past mistakes like Peter and Paul and grow into the persons God has called us to be as we dismantle ideas and beliefs that we used to hold and exchange them for Truth? Will we allow our fear to justify ignoring the needs of our neighbor like the Priest and the Levite, or will we choose instead to love -- to have compassion and mercy like the Samaritan? Will we, like Paul, comfort and encourage others even when we are the ones facing the threat? When we respond in love, we listen, we learn, we adapt, we show mercy and kindness even when others do not show it to us. Controlling our fear response, whether the threat or risk is physical or psychological, real or imagined, requires self-discipline. When we choose to love our neighbors, we are living in the spirit of power, love and self-discipline of which Paul spoke. We have a choice in how we respond.

Love acts with mercy, rather than reacting with vengeance or disdain. Love gives sacrificially, it does not demand for itself. Love doesn't see "others", but instead, love sees neighbors. Love

serves. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. While at the end, faith, hope, and love all remain – the greatest of these is love.

## Communion + Examen

Communion reminds us of how much God loves us. Facing imminent arrest, torture, and death, Jesus took time to minister to his disciples, even the one he knew would betray him. Jesus always responds in love and we are called to do the same. Let's take a few moments together in a prayer of examen as we prepare to receive communion.

When in the last week have I responded in love?

When in the last week have I reacted in fear?

When might I be tempted to react in fear rather than respond in love this week?

How can I love my neighbor this week?

### Prayer of Consecration:

God you have gathered us today in the midst of a culture that too easily gives into fear. We saw in these TV shows, in your servant Peter and we see all around us what it looks like to walk the easy path of fear. But you have called us today to the much more difficult path of love. We confess we do not have the faith required for us to walk in love. And so we bring our doubts, our fears and our failings to your communion table. We lay them at your feet, and in exchange we receive these elements. We pray they become a spiritual food for us, that we might receive the grace we need to have the same faith your son Jesus had when he overcame his fear to walk faithfully to the cross. May we be your people, known not for what we fear but for how we love. We offer these prayers and approach your table in the courageous, faithful name of your son, Jesus.

On the night Jesus was betrayed, he took bread and broke it saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, he took the cup of wine after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant between God and you, sealed by the shedding of my blood. Do this in remembrance of me as often as you drink it." For every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you are announcing the Lord's death until he comes again.

## Assignment + Blessing

How can you choose to respond in love this week, even when your instinct is to react in fear?