

“Living With our Fears”

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Isaiah 43:1-5
Mark 4:35-41

Isaiah 43 tells of the promise of God’s redemption and continual care in the face of great odds.

Isaiah 43:1-5

But now, this is what the LORD says—
he who created you, Jacob, he who formed you, Israel:
“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have summoned you by name; you are mine.
² When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned;
the flames will not set you ablaze.
³ For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One, your Savior;
⁵ Do not be afraid, for I am with you.

In the story of Jesus calming the storm, we get a sense that even the worst political and social storms we face, Jesus’ presence and power enable us to make it to the other side. “Together and only together, we are stronger than the storms.”

Mark 4:35-41 Jesus Calms the Storm

³⁵ That day when evening came, Jesus said to his disciples, “Let us go over to the other side.” ³⁶ Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him. ³⁷ A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. ³⁸ Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, “Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?” ³⁹ Jesus got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, “Quiet! Be still!” Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. ⁴⁰ He said to his disciples, “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?” ⁴¹ They were terrified and asked each other, “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!”

SERMON

A Presbyterian college of mine, Howard Dudley, serves a church I’ve attended a few times when Ann and I have been visiting Ann’s sister and brother-in-law in NC. This Presbyterian pastor shared about a scary moment in his family’s home little over year and a half ago. Howard said he was cooking dinner and a grease fire broke out in their kitchen.

(Picture #1)

As it began to grow and grow and things were on the verge of a really big disaster, he found himself surprisingly using language he rarely used, language that sometimes comes out unexpectedly when you're panicking. I used language, he said, that my family had made a commitment NOT to use. Fortunately, he and his wife were able to get the fire out. But flying off the handle with a number of expletives didn't leave a favorable impression on his teenage daughter. She approached him after the event, mildly scolded him and saying "dad, you said a lot of really bad words. I thought we agreed never to talk like that in this house." "Yes, yes, yes, I know, I know" he said. "But I did it because I was really afraid." The fire could have gotten out of control and done a lot of damage, potentially even burned down the house.

(Picture #2)

"Sometimes," he says, "in our moments of fear, we can forget our commitments."

Yes, sometimes in moments of deepest anxiety, we can lose our composure when what we need to be doing is dealing directly and decisively with the problem at hand to keep it from spreading.

There's sure a lot these days to be anxious and fearful over, isn't there?

One psychologist did a study of 500 people and found that among them they had over 7,000 different fears. They included the personal fear of getting sick, getting cancer, having a heart attack or an accident like I had 9 months ago which still impacts me, a stroke. The fear of losing a loved one, losing a job, losing one's memory. The fear of loneliness, or fear of getting old, or the fear that will effect 100% of us some day, dying.

On a lighter note, there was the fear instilled in the parents of a college student who text-messaged his parents mid-way through his first year of classes saying:

"Dear Mom and Dad,
Better start worrying. Details to follow."

Take your pick. Our fears are legion. What are your greatest fears?

(Picture #3)

There is a study by Chapman University called, “a Survey of American fears.” It’s a sweeping national survey that tracks shifts in our country’s deepest fears.

What’s scarring us in America? Here are the most common fears according to the Chapman study.

(Picture #4)

45% said they were afraid or very afraid of climate change while an equal number voiced concern about natural disasters like the hurricanes and fires which we’ve had more of and on a much greater scale. Prior to the last presidential election, about 50% said they were afraid of civil unrest, violence, and public disorder. Not surprisingly, the American public is finding our politics to be exceptionally frightening (since the last election). Nearly 60% were afraid or very afraid of not having enough money to pay mortgage, rent or medical bills or get by in future. Even a larger percentage were afraid of international conflict, including a war that we now have now with Iran – and worse, the use of nuclear weapons. And the fear that topped all fears were the 65% of Americans from all parties saying they were concerned about corruption in government and the state of our democracy – would it hold together or not?

Maybe you share some or all of these fears. I certainly do – I have been shaken to the core and feel existential angst over the future of our country – and world. The reality is - all these fears are legitimate.

Yet against our understandable fears, the prophet Isaiah says:

But now, this is what the LORD says—

he who created you, Jacob,

he who formed you, Israel:

(Picture #5)

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you...you are mine.

Do not be afraid when you pass through the waters, when you pass through the rivers, when you walk through the fire, I will be with you;

Do not be afraid.

Did you know that “Fear not,” is at the essence of Biblical faith and it’s message is woven throughout Scripture from beginning to end.

It’s the message, for example, Moses hears when his knees are knocking and his stomach somersaulting as he’s called to take on the

Pharaoh, the most powerful figure of that day: "Fear not" God says, "I will be with you."

It's there in the courageous words of the prophets to a depressed and despondent people held in Babylonian captivity, mourning in lonely exile: "Fear not. I'm with you."

It's there when Mary and Joseph and then the shepherds are uncertain what is going to happen and are told: "Do not be afraid. I am with you."

And it's there after the disciples, who have fled in fear at Jesus arrest and are cowering in fear after his crucifixion, are met at the empty tomb with the words: "Fear not. He is risen."

(Picture #6)

The Biblical story is constantly encouraging us to live by faith not by fear. Why? Because there is something so paralyzing about fear, something that immobilizes us at the very time we need to be mobilized.

And yet, in the current political climate, to live by faith and not fear is very challenging because there is so much to legitimately be afraid of.

And to say, "do not be afraid" is far different than saying "you have nothing to be afraid of." Isaiah doesn't say "if you pass through these waters, but when. Not if trouble comes, but whenever it does come. Not if storms arise but wherever and however they do come. The promise is never, you will be safe, comfortable and secure. It's, you will somehow be sustained even through life's most frightening times. Turmoil will come. Trails will arise. Terrorizing experiencing will happen. BUT, says God, I WILL BE WITH YOU when they do!

I suspect it will require a courage in each of us we've never had to tap before, like the courage I think Jesus wanted his disciples to tap into when they encountered a life-threatening storm and felt that Jesus didn't care –

(Picture #7)

– he was asleep in the boat while everyone was full of fear.

Here's the thing that surprises me in the story of the disciples in the middle of the storm. "There's no doubt that the disciples exercised courage countless times before in such storms that the Sea of Galilee was notorious

for.” But “where had their courage gone this time?” Where were their inner resources?

I think New Testament scholar, Walter Wink, is onto something when he proposes that Jesus was intentionally asleep because he wanted the disciples to deal with the storm with the skills God had already given them, not to fall upon him as a crutch. *They* were the seamen, after all! *They* had the resources. He wasn't going to rescue them every time they faced a challenge. No, Jesus slept NOT because he didn't care, but because he cared so much that they learn how to tap into something deeper in themselves than they'd imagined they had, tapping into a deeper inner reservoir of strength than they'd ever had to tap into before. They would have to exercise their own faith, discover in themselves their own courage, find within themselves a power that they had limited to Jesus alone. They would have to rely on God's Spirit to strengthen them as it had and would strengthen Jesus when he would go through his own storms (Walter Wink in the Christian Century, June 1-8, 1994)

Jesus is in the same boat with us to be sure, and Jesus cares for us, of course, cares that we find within us the courage to weather the dark storm we're in with darker clouds ahead. These are storms Jesus will face not *for* us or *instead* of us but *with* us. Which is all to say: Jesus does not always calm our storms, but chooses to calm us in the middle of the storms, giving us courage that doesn't act without fear, but despite it.

(Picture #8)

While I anxiously want Jesus to calm this nightmare of a storm we are in, Jesus' way is to calm us in the storm, giving us a courage to act not without fear, but in the face of it.

Says Anne Lamott about courage: “It's merely fear that has said its prayers.”

Paul Tillich called it "The Courage to Be" - the courage not to let fear run our lives or dominate our emotions, but to say "yes" to life and all that draws out the best in us when we feel like we're in over our heads.

And where do we get that kind of courage? I know of only one place. It's rooted and grounded in faith. Someone once wrote: "Fear knocked at the door, faith answered, and there was no one there."

This is not, of course, a faith that everything will turn out OK in any near future, but a faith that affirms that no matter what may come, no

matter what knocks at our door, no matter how dark the storm or deep the waters, God is with us. And that faith makes all the difference in the world.

(Pictures off)

I think of Nelson Mandela, who helped overthrow the evils of an apartheid government, spent 27 years in prison before being released. As a Christian with a deep faith, he reflected this in his life, saying: "I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it." He was echoing what Martin Luther King Jr, fighting for the same cause of freedom and equality, would say: "Courage is the power of the mind to overcome fear." And Maya Angelou said something similar: "You may not control all the events that happen to you, but you can decide not to be reduced by them." Inspiring people like these are not paralyzed by fear but find deep within a compelling power to push through it.

This is not, of course, a faith that everything will turn out OK, but a faith that affirms that no matter what may come, no matter what knocks at our door, no matter how dark the storm or deep the waters, God is with us. And that faith makes all the difference in the world.

So, dear friends, whatever fears you face today, whether personal, political, or otherwise, we're wise to acknowledge them. We're also wise to remember that we don't live by fear, but by faith. Not a faith that everything will turn out fine in the next year or two or ten or even twenty, but a faith that affirms that no matter how troubling the waters, no matter how dark the clouds on the horizon, no matter what unknowns may come, God is our lifeline in the storm.

God was with us in the fears we faced before and God will be with us in fears that are to come.

If you, like my pastoral colleague, ever feel like we're in a kitchen now with a grease fire that we know could easily spread and wipe out our home

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(Picture #9)

it's best to practice what Robert Fulghum says we all learned in kindergarten, "Hold hands and stick together."

Dear friends, in this frightening world, we can't forget our commitments to God and to each other. We need to hold hands and stick together meeting our fears with courage and standing up for kindness and compassion, for reason and civility in a polarized world there those qualities

have been diminished. We need to continue to love our neighbors, to stand up for all that's just and right, to bear witness to hope that the better angels will prevail in all of us. And all this will need to be sustained by the promise that will hold us up and hold us together: "I am with you," says the Lord. As your strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow, "I am with you always."

Prayer: O God, we come to you with our fears and our anxieties, our angst and our uncertainties, sometimes feeling like we're in over our heads. But we trust in you to be with us in every storm, not always calming it but keeping us calm and keeping us from panicking in the midst of it all. Hold us steady and fill us with courage, doing what we can and never losing sight of a rainbow that will come out at some time on the other side. Remind us that together, we are stronger than any storm and that the destructive forces aligned against us are never as strong as the work of your Spirit within and between us. We pray through Christ, your greatest gift and our world's greatest hope. Amen.