

“Fear Not”

Psalm 27:1-5, 13-14; Isaiah 35:1-4

First Presbyterian Church

December 13, 2020

Psalm 27:1-5, 13-14

¹The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?
The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

²When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh—
my adversaries and foes— they shall stumble and fall.

³Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident.

⁴One thing I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after:
to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple.

⁵For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble;
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;
he will set me high on a rock.

¹³I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD
in the land of the living.

¹⁴Wait for the LORD; be strong,
and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!

Isaiah 35:1-4

³⁵The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus ²it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God. ³Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees. ⁴Say to those who are of a fearful heart, “Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you.”

Sermon

Harvard University chaplain, Peter Gomes, recalls a flight he was on from Boston to London... where he was to preach in an Anglican church the next morning. Midway across the Atlantic, the plane encountered significant turbulence... the captain came on the intercom asking everyone to return to their seats and fasten their belts as the plane lunged and bounced and rocked. Dr. Gomes said he was less concerned about the turbulence than the next morning’s preaching assignment, so he took out his Bible and his notes and went to work. The woman in the seat next to him, who had been silent throughout the flight so far, looked at him... she looked at his Bible... and finally asked, “Do you know something I should know?” Well, yes. I do. A two-word distillation of the Bible could be: “Fear not!”

From cover to cover, the Scriptures implore God's people: "Do not be afraid." When the night sky shimmered... an angel appeared... and the shepherds were terrified. "Fear not. Do not be afraid, for I bring you good tidings of great joy for all people," the angel said. Jesus constantly encouraged his followers NOT to live in fear.¹ When he decided to go to Jerusalem, they were afraid and begged him not to go. When he was arrested, they all flee in fear. After his crucifixion, they cowered in a locked room because they were afraid. And when a few of them ventured to the place of burial early Sunday morning and found an empty tomb, the words came again: "Fear not. Do not be afraid."

One of the many reasons I love Advent is that we get to read all these great prophetic texts from Isaiah... texts which assure us that when God comes, something big... something radical... something transformative happens: implements of war are melted down and made into tools of agriculture... predators and prey live together in harmony... creation itself is reordered for peace among nations, peace between old enemies, peace in every human heart. And... when God comes there will be no fear!

Centuries before the birth of Jesus, Isaiah spoke these words to a frightened nation. Judah was small, weak, and vulnerable in the face of a threatening enemy. The future looked grim... there were a lot of shaking hands and feeble knees when the prophet said, "Strengthen weak hands and make firm weak knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear!'" Not all fear is bad, of course... we know it's like a God-given safety mechanism to warn us of danger or threat. But when fear becomes overwhelming... its victim is our ability to live life. This is why the Bible has so much to say about fear... because fear is such an enemy of life. It's hard to love when you are always afraid. It's hard to care passionately and reach out to others... it's hard to be joyful when you're always afraid. You can't seem to focus on anything else because fear has taken over.²

Did you know there are more than 300 references to fear in the Old and New Testaments? Over 300. These Hebrew and Greek words describe a wide range of emotions from a sense of awe and respect all the way to heart-pounding fright. Well, it was with this heart-pounding freight that the poet penned these words of the 27th psalm: "The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?" if you read the entire psalm, you know that he had so many good reasons to be afraid...to him it felt like he was being threatened from all sides. But to respond to these threats, he doesn't appeal to platitudes – "When the going gets tough, the tough get going." He makes no mention of a "stiff upper lip." No, according to the psalmist, if there is to be ANY encouragement to come... he knows it will come not from within himself, but from outside of his fearful soul... from God. ¹The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? ⁵For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will set me high on a rock.

¹ John Buchanan, "Preaching the Advent Texts: Hope, Peace and Courage," *Journal for Preachers*, Advent 2010, p.11.

² Peter Steinke, "Fear Factor," *Christian Century*, February 20, 2007, p.20.

No matter how severe his circumstances, they are not able to shake his confidence in God - for he has known God's faithfulness in his past.³ Using different words, the prophet's message is the same: "Say to those of fearful heart, 'Be strong. Do not fear! Here is your God.'"

Well, since I've already distilled the entire Bible into two words, allow me in four words to summarize the message of both the prophet and the psalmist: God's coming changes everything. God's coming changes everything... and there is nothing ultimately to fear. For God has come into human history... living our life... dying our death... and in his resurrection, he has won the final battle... there is no longer anything to fear. This is what we mean when in the Creed we say that Jesus Christ was "dead, buried, and descended into hell." Jesus went into hell for us... facing the worst that can ever happen to us and to our loved ones... he has entered death's realm and conquered it... now the battle is over. There is nothing to fear. Isaiah knew this God... and with his poetry painted beautiful pictures of deserts in full bloom, of the blind seeing and the lame leaping like deer. The psalmist also knew this God... and with his poetry spoke of God as light and salvation... stronghold and shelter. Friends, we dare not be naïve about how dangerous our world is... there is much to fear! But let us not allow our fear to consume us... let it not keep us from fully living the life we have found in God. Because God comes... evil and suffering and death have lost their ultimate power... because God comes, we can say to one another: "Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees. "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God."

Good friends once told their pastor about the night when a fierce thunderstorm raced through their town... and their little three-year old daughter got scared and called out for her parents. As the thunder pealed and the lightning crashed, her mother came to her, took her in her arms and said, "Don't be afraid. Everything will be alright. God will take care of you." "I know," the little girl said, "but I want someone with skin." Those same parents also told him that when they put her to bed... said their prayers... and kissed her goodnight... for years as they left her room she would say: "Make sounds. Make sounds" Of course, she wanted the security of her parents' presence... the sound of their voices... the dishes being done... the newspaper rustling... the television set... the sounds of home and safety and love.⁴

And there will continue to be times when each one of us will have "weak hands and feeble knees." Walking into our first AA meeting... walking out of the office for the last time... standing over the grave of the love of our life... sitting in the oncologist office... watching the moving van pull away... graduating into a COVID job market. There will be times when we are afraid and even times when that fear may overwhelm us so that we can see nothing else. When these times come, I pray that someone "with skin" will be ready with the words, "Be strong. Do not fear. Here is your God." And failing that, I pray you will remember that in Jesus Christ, God comes close... as close as you very breath... and will never leave you. In the story of Christmas, we believe something cosmic has happened. Everything is different now. Evil and suffering and death have been put in their place. And we can now sing with hearts full of joy, Yet in the dark streets shineth he everlasting light: the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."

³ Steinke again.

⁴ Buchanan, p.12