

"Fear Not!"

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Trinitarian Congregational Church

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Psalm 27

The 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?

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

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

One 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.

For 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.

Now my head is lifted up above my enemies all around me, and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and make melody to the Lord.

Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me!

"Come," my heart says, "seek his face!" Your face, Lord, do I seek.

Do not hide your face from me. Do not turn your servant away in anger, you who have been my help. Do not cast me off, do not forsake me, O God of my salvation!

If my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will take me up.

Teach me your way, O Lord, and lead me on a level path because of my enemies.

Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries, for false witnesses have risen against me, and they are breathing out violence.

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

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

I almost titled this message, "*It Could be a Bomb?*" I was with a friend one evening years ago. We went to the mall. As my friend pulled into a parking space he noticed a paper bag. It was on its side and it looked like there might be something in it, so he quickly steered to the right and pulled into another space. He looked at me and said, "It could be a bomb." To this day I don't know if he was serious, half-serious or joking. But I heard it at least 3/4 serious, because I remember thinking, that's kind of a sad way to go through life - thinking there's a bomb in every bag! (this was before 9/11) I went over and looked inside the bag. It was filled with trash from a fast food restaurant.

Fear can take the fun out of life, can't it? Constant worrying, always a bit anxious, having fearful thoughts running through your mind like a broken record. Fear steals our peace, raises our blood pressure and diminishes our joy.

Our Wednesday morning Bible study group is just finishing up a book study on Max Lucado's *Fearless*. We've been thinking about fear for a number of weeks now, hoping to achieve the goal of the book, which is to trust more and fear less. Max says this about fear: "Fear, it seems, has taken a hundred-year lease on the building next door and set up shop. Oversize and rude, fear is unwilling to share the heart with happiness. Happiness complies and leaves. Do you ever see the two together? Can one be happy and afraid at the same time? Clear-thinking and afraid? Confident and afraid? Merciful and afraid? No. Fear is the big bully in the high school hallway; brash, loud, and unproductive. For all the noise fear makes and room it takes, fear does little good."

Max tells the story of watching a father play with his two small

daughters at a swimming pool. The father is in the pool and the daughters jump into the pool and into his arms - at least the one daughter does. The other stands by the edge of the pool and watches. She thinks about it. She sees how much fun her sister is having. She almost jumps but she doesn't and she steps back. Fear has her in its grip. She's afraid to take the plunge. Fear does that, doesn't it? Fear can be parallelizing, keeping us stuck in its grasp. Our spirits are not free when they're gripped with fear. Fear is a tyrant sometimes. It takes control. It takes charge and we yield to it.

Fear can also be dangerous. We don't make good decisions when we're afraid. For example, there was a family I knew that told me a rather funny story, at least funny looking back. Their elderly father passed out in the living room one evening. The mother shouted to her daughter, "Dad's not responding. Call 911!" The daughter picked up the phone and said, "What's the number?" The mother said, "It's 9-1-1!" Fear is usually not a performance enhancer!

That's a funny example of fear diminishing thinking. Here's one that's not so funny. On the evening of March 3, 1943, bomb-raid sirens sounded in London, England. Life came to a halt in the city. Cars and buses stopped in their tracks. Everyone searched the skies for German airplanes. Anti-air craft artillery forces starting shooting into the empty sky. Many people on the streets of London began to scream. Some threw themselves onto the ground. The hysteria grew and grew, even though no one saw a single plane. Many people headed for the Bethnal Green Underground Station, where more than 500 people had already taken refuge. Another 500 more joined them. As more and more people tried to get down the stairs something went terribly wrong. People fell and within minutes as people rushed down the stairs they, too, fell and created a pile-up of human beings, literally people stacked up on top of each other. What made matters worse is that the folks trying to get into the station thought they were being kept out on purpose and so they began to push and push. The chaos lasted for about 15 minutes, but pulling everyone out of that station took almost 4 hours. And in the end it was tragic. 173 men, women and children had died. No bombs had been dropped. It was fear that did the killing.

Now that's an extreme example but it illustrates how fear is a horrible master. It does harsh things to people. Fear destroys communication. It destroys relationships. It often eliminates reasonable compromises.

For example, how many times did you hear, "Happy Holidays" this past Christmas? People seem so afraid of offending someone or being labeled as intolerant that Christians now wish other Christians, "Happy Holidays."

Here's another example: gun control. I have a good friend who fears that those who want to take semiautomatic weapons off the streets will one day come after his hunting rifle. This fear makes it difficult to even talk about the issue. Fear does that, perhaps for both of us?

The Bible has a lot to say about fear. Psalm 27: The 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? Max Lucado makes the case that "fear not" was the most common command of Christ. He says the Gospels list 125 imperatives - straightforward directives from Jesus. 21 of them are "do not be afraid," fear not," "have courage," "take heart," or "be of good cheer." The second most common command is love God and love your neighbor. Those directives occur only 8 times. Think of these statements, familiar to many of you:

So don't be afraid. You are worth much more than the sparrows. - Matt. 10:31

Take courage; your sins are forgiven. - Matt. 9:2

I tell you, do not worry about your life - what you will eat, what you will drink . . . - Matt. 6:25

Don't be afraid. Just believe. Your daughter will be well. - Luke 8:50

Take heart, It is I. Do not be afraid. - Matt. 14:27

Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. - Matt. 10:28

Do not fear little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. - Luke 12:32

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, and trust also in me. - John 14:1

Why are you frightened? he asked. Why are your hearts filled with doubt-Luke 24:38

Jesus came and touched them and said, "Arise, and do not be afraid. -

Matt. 17:7

In the same way that I do not want my children to live in fear, God does not want us to live in fear.

In Luke 8 there's that great story about being in the boat with Jesus. The disciples and Christ are on the Sea of Galilee, when a huge storm arises. The wind is fierce. The waves are crashing on the boat. The boat is taking on a lot of water and it's a dangerous situation. To make matters worse, Jesus is asleep. So the disciples shout at him to wake him up - "Master, Master, we are perishing! We're gonna die!!!!" Jesus wakes up and he rebukes the wind and the waves stop, and the seas became calm. Then Jesus said to them, "Where is your faith?" I always thought he was being a bit hard on them. Then I thought about what I mean when I say to my sons, "Where's your hat?" "Where are your gloves?" I'm saying, "Go, find your hat & gloves and put them on. They're needed now." That's what Jesus is saying to the disciples - in the storms of life, go and find your faith and put it on. Put it to work! He wants us to trust more and fear less.

Here are some suggestions for how to put your faith to work and calm the storm of our fears.

1 - Meditation

Notice I didn't say prayer. Prayer is a great thing and we should certainly pray about our fear. I like that saying that "Courage is fear that has said its prayers." But sometimes prayer can actually keep us stuck in our fear, because prayer can sometimes keep us focused on our problems. Meditation is seeking oneness with God, seeking only to be in God's presence. Meditation is seeking to be filled with God's Spirit. Meditation is simply seeking God, and not merely an answer to our problems.

Psalm 27 - One thing I asked of the Lord, that I will seek after, to live in the house of the Lord, all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord . . . I will sing and make melody to the Lord . . . Your face, O Lord, do I seek.

2. Praise.

Just like meditation, praise gets the focus off of us and our problems and onto God and God's goodness. Praise can happen privately, even singing a favorite hymn or worship song, or corporately at Sunday worship.

3. Scripture.

Captain Milt Shaw was in the Navy during W.W.II. He once told me that whenever his ship was being fired up he quoted this verse for courage: Fear not, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand. - Isaiah 41:10

4. Tell a friend. Share your fear.

One of the first people who ever came to me for counseling when I was first ordained was a woman I'll call Bea. Bea was afraid of dying. She came into my office one day and told me that. She then spoke for about 20-25 minutes. I think I jumped in once or twice with a clarifying question, partly to show I was truly listening. Finally she jumped up with a huge smile on her face, looking like a new person. She hugged me and said, "Thank you so much! I feel so much better!" I replied, "Oh, it was nothing." Max Lucado says, "Putting your worries into words disrobes them. They look silly standing there naked."

Let me close with this quick little hunting story. Two hunters were out in the woods one day when they came across the biggest set of bear claw prints in the snow that they'd ever seen. They could only imagine how big the bear must have been that left those tracks. So the one hunter says to his buddy, "Listen, Joe, I've got an idea. You go that way and see where the bear went. I'll go this way and see where he came from!"

Faith helps us face our fears.

Amen.