

Do Not Fear what They Fear

Isaiah 8:11-17

June 12, 2016

President Franklin Roosevelt famously said “The only thing we have to fear, is fear itself”. What he meant was that fear itself can be a dangerous thing. It can tear us apart as individuals. It can tear nations apart. It can even tear churches apart if they are not firmly rooted in the truth of God.

Maybe it’s ironic, but I’ve been afraid this week as I’ve prepared to preach on the subject of fear. You can’t really talk about fear without reminding people of the things which we are afraid of; things which we’d rather not think about, or perhaps things we already think about a little too much.

What do we fear? We worry about personal health, and that of family members. We worry about our children, and choices they make. We worry about our finances.

We’re afraid of terrorist attacks and other violence. War. Economic collapse.

And have I mentioned that this year is Election year? There is fear for our country’s future. Public issues that anger or sadden us.

In case you don’t feel afraid yet, I have prescription for you. Go home and watch the news. Listen to talk radio. Go on social media. I promise that you will encounter fear.

And yet, fear is not all bad. In fact, God designed us to feel fear. Fear is an instinct which God gave to us to help protect ourselves and avoid danger. We call this the “fight or flight response.” Without it, none of us would outgrow that stage most young children go through when their parents need to constantly watch them because they don’t have that common-sense, self-protecting instinct yet. So a basic capacity for fear is a good thing.

But fear becomes a problem when we act on it in the wrong way, or when worry comes to dominate our thinking and our whole lives.

The fact is that fear is a given. It’s just a reality of being human that we will experience fear. The question is how will respond to our fears, or perhaps *what* we will fear.

Or maybe the question is *whom* we will fear. That is the question which Isaiah invites us to ask. Isaiah lived in a time of rampant fear, not unlike today—although the people in Jerusalem had even more reason to be afraid than we do.

Isaiah the prophet lived during the time period of the *divided monarchy*. Israel had for some time been split into separate kingdoms. The northern kingdom kept the name *Israel*, and the southern nation was the kingdom of *Judah*, and its capital was Jerusalem.

In Isaiah chapter 7, we read about a conspiracy, or a plot, between the kingdom of Israel and the kingdom of Aram to attack Jerusalem. King Ahaz of Judah, and the rest of the people, were scared. The text says that “the hearts of Ahaz and his people were shaken, as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind.” God told the people not to be afraid, because these two plotting kingdoms would be taken out. But this was not completely comforting, because God’s instrument for dealing with the Northern Kingdom and Aram would be none other than the Assyrians, a cruel, war-like people who were carving out a large empire and cutting down everyone in their path. The people God was going to use to save Jerusalem, were even scarier than the immediate threats. There were two hungry wolves on their doorstep and one ferocious tiger crouching close behind them. Whatever fears we might be facing, chances are they pale before the fear that the Israelites faced at this time.

In the midst of this situation of fear and danger, God called Isaiah to be set apart in his mindset, and not to jump on the fear bandwagon. He said “Do not call conspiracy everything this people calls a conspiracy; do not fear what they fear, and do not dread it.”

Now, there were some very real reasons to be afraid. The enemies threatening Jerusalem in Isaiah's time were real. The threat against Judah wasn't some far-fetched conspiracy theory. It was a very real threat! The reason which God told Isaiah not to cry out "Conspiracy!" or not to "fear what they fear" was not because the objects of their fear weren't real, but rather because God was greater than the kingdoms they feared.

I think there is a warning in here about getting caught up in conspiracy theories. Most conspiracy theories suggest that the events of our world are being determined by shadowy, sinister forces beyond our control. Now I suspect that these theories in many cases emerge because we like to look for imaginative explanations to help us cope with the fear of the unknown. But even if most of these theories are far-fetched, it is true there are frightening forces at work in our world. The problem is when we think that these forces are more powerful than God—when we think that they are not only beyond our control, but beyond God's control. In short, when we fear something more than God.

God told Isaiah "The Lord almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread." So the people's fears were not to be dismissed because there was nothing to fear, but because they knew a God who was more worthy of fear than any empire or army. They weren't called to simply switch their fears off, but rather to let their fear of their enemies be displaced by the fear of the Lord.

What does it mean to fear the Lord? This may sound like a strange instruction for us. Aren't we supposed to love God and trust him, not fear him? But the biblical concept of the Fear of the Lord actually includes the idea of loving and trusting him. It includes the idea of reverence and awe before God; of regarding God as more important than anything else in this world, and making our life decisions on this basis. We could define the fear of the Lord this way: it is *a reverent regard for God, which defines the way we think, make decisions, and live our lives*. A person who fears God builds his or her life around the reality of God's character and purposes.

I think we can gain some idea of what it means to fear God by looking at our human relationships with those we care about. Think about someone you love—someone who is very important to you; perhaps your husband or wife, your parents or your children, or your best friend. This is someone who *matters* to you in a powerful way. You want to take this person into account when you make decisions. You ask questions like "What will she think about what I am going to do?" Or "how will he feel about this?" "How will it affect them?" You would have a *fear* of damaging you relationship with this important person. Each of us probably have a number of people in our lives whom we *fear* in this sense, and that's a good thing, because it means that we love them. But God calls us to fear him above all; to be more concerned about what he thinks than what anyone else thinks; to make God and what he cares about the most important thing as we live our lives.

When we don't have an appropriate fear of the Lord, other fears tend to take over. I think this is especially true in our relationships with people. Have you ever stopped to think about how easily our relationships with others are dominated by fear? Fear of what people think about us? Whether they will like us? Whether we will be successful in their eyes?

Let's look at king Ahaz. Like I said before, he was the king of Judah at the time that this message was given to Isaiah. In 2 Kings Chapter 16, we learn more about King Ahaz. This chapter makes it clear that Ahaz didn't fear God. He feared the Assyrian Empire. He was more eager to get on the good side of Assyria than he was to get on the right side of God. He was more worried about what they thought than what God thought. In so many areas of our lives, we can make the same mistake. We "fear what they fear" more than we fear God.

We've already talked about many of the things which we tend to be afraid of. Many of these fears make sense. The fact is that there are many things in our world which are truly threatening. God does not call us to pretend otherwise. Instead, God calls us to know him

better. Our fears are not resolved by denial. Instead, they are put in proper perspective when we place our focus on God and remember who he really is.

We can think of it this way. The world is huge, right? It's about 8,000 miles in diameter, or about 24,000 miles all the way around it. But here is the earth compared to the sun. Earth doesn't seem so big anymore, does it? It's like that with our fears. The things we are afraid of might seem insurmountably huge, but they are tiny compared the power of God. We have earth-sized fears, but God has universe-sized power. We fear many things in this world in part because they are outside of our control. But they are not outside of God's control. When we look at from this perspective, our fears don't necessarily vanish. But we do find a new kind of courage; courage which is not the absence of fear, but rather the confidence to walk by faith; to trust God; to do the right thing even in the face of our fears.

In verse 14, Isaiah describes God, in his sovereign power, as a "holy place", or a "sanctuary". In other words, God is a shelter, a refuge, for his people. Isaiah is actually making a reference to the temple. Part of the temple in Jerusalem was called the "Holy Place". This place represented the presence of God. It was a reminder that God was with his people. But here Isaiah is going beyond saying that God was symbolically present with his people in the temple. God himself was the sanctuary, the Holy Place, the place of refuge.

When we fear God, we are confident in his presence dwelling with us. We are able to say with Psalm 46:1-2 "God is our refuge and Strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea." His powerful presence meets us wherever we might be. We should face our fears not by denying them, nor by asserting our own power over them. Instead, we need to do two things: we need to acknowledge our fears in the presence of God, and we need to acknowledge God in the presence of our fears. Oh yes, we will have times of fear. But do not fear what they fear!

Isaiah writes that God, who is a sanctuary for his people, a place of strength in the face of fear, is also a stone over which people stumble. God is described as a Rock; something that is strong to give shelter, but which can also be an obstacle or a stumbling block. What did Isaiah mean by this? Why would he describe God this way?

This idea is also applied to Jesus in 1 Peter 2:6-8

"See, I lay a stone in Zion (Jerusalem), a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame"

Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe,

"The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone" and "a stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall."

They stumble because they disobey the message..."

The point here is that we need to make a choice about how we respond to Jesus. For those who trust in him, he will be a cornerstone of their life; a strong foundation and a refuge. But those who reject him will have to face the consequences.

Here's a picture that I think illustrates the idea we are talking about. Do you see the rock? Which side of the rock would you rather be on? If you are on the right side of the rock, it will shelter you from the wave. If you are on the wrong side of the rock, you will be smashed against it. We are on the right side of God's goodness and power when we trust him; when we fear him above all other concerns. We are on the wrong side of God's goodness and power when we look to our own strength; when we live out of our fears rather than our trust. Don't be on the wrong side of the rock! Do not fear what they fear!

At the end of this passage, Isaiah makes an intriguing, very personal statement. Verse 17 reads "I will wait for the Lord, who is hiding his face from the descendants of Jacob. I will put my trust in him." Here we get the sense of Isaiah's own inner struggle. On the one hand, he

confidently asserts that he will wait for the Lord and that he will put his trust in him. But on the other hand, he makes this statement that God is hiding his face from the descendants of Jacob, or from the Israelites. God is hiding his face. That's a discouraging idea, isn't it? God really was hiding his face from Israel and from Judah because they had rejected him. In other words, the people of Israel were experiencing the consequences of their misplaced fear. They were more concerned with the conspiracies and threats against them than they were with God. God was hiding his face from them because they were hiding from him!

God promises to be a refuge, a sanctuary, for all of those who place their hope in him. But there are times when it feels like God is hiding his face from us. In our times of fear, God sometimes seems distant. We can be frustrated with the silence of God. It's okay to admit that! Sometimes I think we tend to assume that experiencing fear or aloneness is somehow unspiritual. "*Real* Christians never feel distant from God!" But this kind of spiritual machoism isn't what real spirituality is about.

Real faith is not about denying our fear with spiritual-sounding talk. Real faith acknowledges fears in the presence of God, and acknowledges God in the presence of fear. Real faith *waits* for God. Notice how the word *wait* implies anticipating something that we don't see yet. Faith knows how to keep looking to God in trust; keeps asking "how long, Lord?" even when God's answer is "not yet". Real faith still feels fear. But it does not fear what they fear.

Our world is consumed by fear. We've already talked about some of the things which we are afraid of: sickness, financial ruin, war, terrorism, our nation's future. And these fears aren't just personal. Fear is contagious, and there is an epidemic of fear in our world. How much of our culture, especially our political culture, is driven by fear?

God calls us as Christians to be set-apart from this mentality. Too often, there is no noticeable difference between us and our unbelieving neighbors when it comes to being dominated by fear. But we have a tremendous opportunity as Christ-followers to glorify God by standing out from the fear epidemic.

In 1 Peter 3:13-15, the Apostle Peter quotes this passage from Isaiah: he writes

¹³Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? ¹⁴But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. "Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened."¹⁵ But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.

Peter is writing to Christians who are living in an environment that is hostile to their faith. They are being persecuted. Peter is explaining how they can point people to God in this environment. He tells them to always be prepared to give an answer for the hope that they have. But in order to do this, they need to recognize that Christ is Lord, and they need live as though Christ is Lord by not being controlled by the fear of their persecutors. If we are going to hold out our message of hope in Christ, we need to place our hope in Christ. We need to recognize that he is Lord, not the things we fear.

I would like to conclude the message this morning with a personal story about facing fear. But I am not the one to tell this story. I'm going to invite Heidi Kellogg back up to share some things that she and her husband Andy have learned as they have faced situations of fear.

This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
on June 12, 2016 by Micah Carpenter.

In 2007, Andy and I moved to Nigeria with Bjorn, age 3, and Leif, age 2. Just before we moved there as a family, Andy had traveled to Nigeria alone for a translation workshop, and while there, they were robbed at gunpoint. Also, the year before we moved to Nigeria, Leif struggled with asthma. He was on steroids 7 times, and in the ER twice. We moved to Nigeria just before the dry season when the Harmattan winds from the Sahara desert blow down and the air is thick with dust.

Those first two years, there were many things that made me anxious. When Andy would travel for 2-3 weeks for translation workshops, I would be home alone with the boys, and I would worry about someone trying to break in and rob us. It wasn't an unfounded fear. We knew several people who had been the victims of robberies.

I also worried about my children's health. Leif struggled terribly with his asthma that first dry season, and we truly believe it is only because so many people prayed that he survived it.

We all had a variety of illnesses including: giardia, dysentery, salmonella, walking pneumonia, and malaria. Our second term, Hazel had malaria twice in 3 weeks and we feared for her life. We couldn't get her fever below 103.5 and she was completely listless.

Also during our second term, Boko Haram became active in our area. It became all too common to hear an explosion on a Sunday morning, and discover that a church nearby had been bombed. When we drove to church, we would pass through police and military checkpoints. Once at church, men from the church would use mirrors to check under our car, and they would search our trunk and under the hood. I had to leave my purse and diaper bag in the car. We were wanded over to check for guns as we entered the church, and then once inside, they would lock the church doors until the end of the service.

Once when I was in the market with some friends, I got a text that there was an explosion in the neighboring town. We kept shopping, but as we came out of one shop, we noticed that everyone in the market was running in our direction. As we rounded the corner, a man grabbed my friend's arm and told her to slow down. We ducked into another shop and waited until we felt safe to drive home.

You can imagine that I had an anxiety problem. So, I asked God to show me what promise I could cling to to find peace. I did not believe that just because we were walking in his will that my family was guaranteed safety. I worried that God might allow my worst fears to come true, and that I would become bitter toward him and also lose my salvation.

There were two passages especially that he brought my attention to repeatedly. The first was Philippians 4:6-7

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

So, my first lesson was that God didn't want me to be anxious about ANYTHING, even things that seem reasonable from my human perspective.

Another lesson was to focus on what I had to be THANKFUL for.

And the promise was that if I did that, God would guard my anxious heart and mind with his peace that doesn't even make sense in our circumstances.

Another passage he brought to mind, which I found especially helpful, was Isaiah 43:1-3

“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. 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. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your savior...”

I saw 2 promises here:

1. God would not allow my suffering to destroy me.
2. He would always be with me.

I have to admit, when I first read this promise, I wasn't sure that God's presence felt like enough of a promise, but I knew it should be.

I had become a sort of joyless person in my anxiety, so I asked God to restore my joy in the Gospel, and that is how I came to the point of treasuring God's presence, God himself, above all else.

During our second term, God gave me a situation where I struggled to forgive someone else. I realized that because the person who hurt me was also a Christian, Jesus had already paid for her sin on the cross, and she might never experience any other discipline for it. That was hard to swallow, but I realized his sacrifice on the cross is what keeps me from paying for all my sins too, so I couldn't very well wish God wasn't so merciful. I also realized that Jesus not only died for my sins, he also lived a life of perfect obedience in my place. I was struggling to forgive, but Jesus forgave perfectly, and because I trusted him for salvation, that was the record I had before God.

All of these things combined helped me to let go of my fears. If God himself is my greatest treasure, then I can never lose my greatest treasure, no matter what else I may lose in this life. And if God has saved me from my sins by sending his own son to die for my sins in my place, how can he not be my greatest treasure??

I just lost my dad. My dad was one of God's greatest gifts to me on this earth. I will miss him terribly. But I did not lose my greatest treasure. My greatest treasure is God himself, and he has promised to always be with me.

This testimony was shared at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
on June 12, 2016 by Heidi Kellogg.