



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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**Be Strong, Do Not Fear!**  
Dr. Jim Gilchrist

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*Say to those who are of a fearful heart, “Be strong, do not fear!” (Isaiah 35:4).*

During this Advent season, so many of our lectionary texts talk about hope. That’s not surprising, since Advent is about looking forward to the coming of Christ, and Christ is the one in whom we Christians place our ultimate hope. Jesus will come to make all things right and new one day—for the world as a whole, and for each of us individually, either in this life or when we come at last into the fullness of his kingdom.

One of the main things we need hope for is to overcome our fears. It’s striking how these texts from Isaiah, from more than 2500 years ago, sound as fresh and relevant as the news today. In our day we need all the hope we can get, since we live in a time when people are afraid of so many things.

Lots of people are afraid of what’s going on in their personal lives, or the lives of their family and friends. Diagnoses from the doctor bring good news for some, but for others they tell of struggles to be endured and hard decisions to be made. Parents worry about their children, hoping they’ll avoid getting drawn into the myriad temptations that surround young people. Older folk face all sorts of changes, having to reorient themselves after years of working or raising children, and now they wonder what this new, uncertain future might bring.

As if all these personal concerns were not enough, the world itself can feel like a scary place. There are wars and rumors of wars abroad; some feel compassion for people already caught up in them, while others mainly fear

that these conflicts will spill over into our own country and be harmful to us. We've just come through a bitterly divisive election, where fears were consciously conjured up by some of the candidates; now some people are hopeful that better times are coming, while others fear that the dogs of bigotry and hatred have been unleashed with potentially devastating consequences for the most vulnerable among us. And almost every month, it seems, there are more warnings from scientists about the mounting impact of human activity on the earth's climate, while some deny that there's any important change going on at all, or if there is, that humans can or should try to do anything about it.

There's a lot to be afraid of these days, and so the Advent message of hope as an antidote to fear could hardly be more timely.

The prophet Isaiah stirs believers out of the paralysis of fear, and out of the complacency that goes along with it:

Strengthen the weak hands,  
and make firm the feeble knees.  
Say 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.

People of faith are to be strong—not relying on our own resources, but empowered by the one true God, Maker of heaven and earth. We know that God is powerful, and God will prevail. In the meantime God gives strength to all who trust in him. We have the Holy Spirit to guide and comfort and strengthen us. We are not alone with our fears,

but as the apostle Paul says, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”

Among the things we can do in the strength of God is to tell the truth. You’d think that would be self-evident, that almost everyone would care about truth, but in our day even truth telling can be an act of bravery. Lots of observers note how we seem to live in an increasingly fact-free world. People simply make things up that they want to believe, or want others to believe, and pass them on through some kind of media until they find a critical mass of followers, whether or not there’s any basis in fact for what they claim. It’s as if truth doesn’t matter, as long as enough people choose to believe.

But that’s not a healthy way to live, for individuals or for society. The Christian psychiatrist M. Scott Peck wrote a book in the 1980s called *People of the Lie*, subtitled *The Hope for Healing Human Evil*. Peck noticed in his private practice and in the world around him that lying is closely related to evil because people who are up to no good can’t tolerate the truth. The gospel of John puts the same point this way: “And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.”

Christians who are faithful to God want to tell the truth. We worship a Savior who said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” It’s our responsibility to seek the truth, even when it tells us things we’d rather not hear. And it’s our responsibility to stand up for truth and call people out whenever they spread falsehoods that can harm other people, and tear at the fabric of society by undermining commitment to the truth itself.

It takes courage to tell the truth in a world where untruths are so easily spread and reinforced. It takes courage to be faithful to God when it's so much easier to acquiesce in evil, as long as our own interests don't appear to be threatened.

The church at its best has always been a brave band of believers, facing personal crises with faith, hope, and love, and standing up against idolatry and every other form of evil. That's true of the church at its best, but it's also true that the church has not always been at its best. Too often the church has stood by complacently, failing to speak out against all sorts of evils, from the practice of slavery and segregation to the rise of fascism and the persecution of Jews in Europe.

At our Pittsburgh Presbytery meeting last week, Sheldon Sorge, the general minister to the Presbytery, offered a thoughtful twist on the question John the Baptist's disciples brought to Jesus. John's disciples wanted to know whether Jesus was the Messiah, the real thing, or whether they ought to keep looking for somebody else. Sheldon's point was that many people are asking something similar of the church today: Are you the real thing? Are you really people of God who practice what you preach, loving God and loving your neighbors as yourselves, or should we keep looking for some other community to do what's right in this world?

It takes courage to be people of faith—courage to face our fears, and to do what's right when it's so much easier to go along with what's wrong. Some people think courage is the absence of fear, that brave people are simply unafraid. They know their own fears and so they don't think of themselves as being brave at all. But courage is not the absence of fear; it's finding the strength to take charge of our

fear and not let it rule the way we live. No one would ever need courage if we were never afraid. But life is full of frightening things, and so we have lots of opportunities to practice the courage we need to live as faithful people, by the grace of God.

In the meantime, we have to learn to be patient—patient with ourselves, patient with others, and patient even with God. Patience is a virtue we'd just as soon not need. We'd rather have whatever we want, instead of the patience to go without it. Patience feels like a consolation prize, like the thing you get instead of the thing you really wanted.

But patience is also a valuable gift, not only because we can't always get what we want, but because patience teaches us to rely upon God. If we always got whatever we wanted, as soon as we wanted it, all our desires would merely reinforce self-centeredness. We'd be stuck forever in the Terrible Twos, where toddlers have tantrums when they can't have their own way. Learning to wait, even for the good things we want, teaches us to look beyond ourselves and put our hope in the goodness of God. Relying on God then becomes a source of the inexhaustible strength that practicing patience can bring. So the Letter of James says:

Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.

The psalmist says, "The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth." Be strong then, not in your own power alone, but in the strength of the God who



made you, and wants you to grow in faith and hope and love. And don't be afraid. Don't be afraid to tell the truth, and to do whatever is right.

People are asking about the church of Jesus Christ, as they asked about Jesus himself: "Are you the one, or should we keep looking for somebody else?" Let's not turn people away because we who call ourselves Christians are not strong enough or brave enough to be his witnesses in the world. Let those who are searching find in us, in this church, a beloved community that hopes and trusts in God, and lives faithfully and patiently as we wait for the coming of his kingdom.



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