



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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I Will Not Be Afraid

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Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation (Isaiah 12:2).

A homiletics professor at Yale Divinity School used to tell us students that the chief genius of a popular preacher in America was to come up with a different title for the same sermon every Sunday. The professor said that by way of encouraging us not to go forth and do likewise.

I always hear that professor's voice when I find myself coming back to a theme we've talked about recently, but as it happens the lectionary for this third Sunday in Advent invites us to consider once again a topic that is enormously important in our own lives and in the life of our nation these days. That is the topic of fear, and the way that our faith can overcome it.

A popular, relatively recent hymn comes from the words of the prophet Isaiah: "Surely it is God who saves me. I will trust in him and not be afraid. For the Lord is my stronghold and my sure defense, and he will be my savior."

Do you believe that? Do you know that it is God who saves you? Do you really trust in God? Because if we really do trust God, then the promise of the scripture and the testimony of people with the deepest Christian faith is that, fundamentally, we don't have to be afraid.

Everyone has at least occasional moments of fear, of course, and within limits a little fear can actually be a

good thing. Fear is like pain in that regard. If I have a pain in my side and it doesn't go away but only gets worse, I might go to the doctor and find out that I have appendicitis. In that case my momentary pain is a blessing because it says, "There's a problem here. You'd better do something about it." Without the prompting of pain I would never have known that something was wrong, and I wouldn't have done anything to correct it.

A little burst of fear can be like that too. If a parent sees her toddler making his way toward the top of the steps, she may have a sudden burst of fear that makes her get up and run across the room and snatch up the little guy before he has a chance to fall. When I'm on my motorcycle at a stoplight and the driver on my right is texting somebody and the one behind her is chatting away on a cell phone, I know I need to keep my distance from those cars, and when the light turns green I hit the throttle pretty hard.

A little fear, like a little pain, can be a good thing, if it's temporary and motivates us to take action to protect ourselves or somebody else. Fear and pain are built-in mechanisms to help keep us safe, and when they do their job and then go away, they serve us well. You might even say they are among the gifts of God.

But chronic fear is a different thing altogether. People who live in a more or less steady state of fear are not healthy or happy. In severe cases they might form a phobia that prevents them from doing even normal things, or suffer from a post-traumatic stress disorder that keeps them constantly on edge and unable to relax, or develop

some degree of paranoia that makes them unreasonably afraid of other people's motives. In less severe cases lots of people worry constantly about all sorts of things: whether they'll have enough money, whether they might get sick, whether somebody really likes them, or a host of other possibilities.

Fear in small doses that motivates us to solve problems and then goes away is actually a kind of gift. But chronic fear is the opposite. Instead of giving us something valuable it robs us of joy and peace and contentment, and keeps us stirred up and anxious over things we can't do anything about.

That's what Jesus has in mind when he tells us not to worry. He doesn't mean that we shouldn't make reasonable efforts to provide for ourselves and others. He just means that to get stuck in a rut of worry and fear serves no purpose, and in fact it takes our minds off the goodness of God and robs us of the peace that comes from trusting in God, which is the real meaning of faith.

Some people talk about faith as if it was just a kind of optimism, telling ourselves that no bad thing will ever happen to us or to anyone we care about. So they go to the doctor, for example, and they say, "I have faith that the news will be good; the diagnosis will be that everything is all right."

But that kind of optimism is not what Christians mean by faith. It's fine to hope for the best, of course, but we all know that sometimes the news is good and sometimes it isn't. If all we mean by "faith" is telling

ourselves that the news will always be good, sooner or later our faith will crumble, because the simple truth is that in the course of a lifetime many good things come our way, but also some hard or challenging or truly bad things are likely to happen. Then what will we do? If what we mean by “faith” is just a kind of naïve optimism, we’re bound to be disappointed sooner or later. And if that kind of optimism is tied to our understanding of God, then our belief in God is likely to fall apart someday too.

Biblical faith is not naïve optimism. When Isaiah says, “Surely it is God who saves, me; I will trust and not be afraid,” he’s facing troubles within his own nation of Israel and hostile countries all around. When Paul writes, “Do not worry about anything ... and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,” he’s being beaten up and thrown in jail for the very faith he proclaims. And when Jesus says, “Do not worry. For which of you by worrying can add a single hour to your span of life,” he knows that before very long he himself will wind up on a cross.

Biblical faith is not a matter of telling ourselves that no bad thing will ever happen. That’s just denial or wishful thinking. Faith as a deep and abiding trust in God is not a denial of reality but precisely the opposite: giving thanks to God for all good gifts and finding courage and strength and perseverance in God to face every challenge and hardship that comes our way. “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil,” the psalmist says, “for you are with me.” That’s what we mean by faith.

Much of what some people call faith is really an attempt to be in control of everything, in the futile and foolish belief that we could ever really do that. We all know people who are “control freaks,” and typically the ones who most need to be in control of everything are those who, not far below the surface, are the most anxious and afraid. And people who bluster the most are often the most insecure, because secure people don’t need to do that. Obsessive-compulsive disorders, and the milder forms of OCD that many of us recognize in ourselves and others, are attempts to deal with underlying fears by repeating some thought or action in the hope that it will bring comfort and a sense of security at last, which of course it never really does.

Lots of people try harder to control the little things when they’re most afraid of bigger things they can’t control. And some people invoke God as a kind of control writ large. Their idea of faith is that God will do whatever they want by way of controlling the things beyond their own control: health, wealth, security, and all the rest. That’s why the Prosperity Gospel is so popular in America. The basic idea is that believing in God is a way of doing well in the world, because God will give you what you want by controlling the things you can’t control yourself.

How different is all this from the faith of Isaiah or Paul or Jesus, and the faith of the people we’ve known and admired most, who trust God in good times and in bad. People of biblical faith are fundamentally grateful. They thank God for every good thing in life because they know that all good things, including the ability to work and earn and succeed in life, is ultimately a gift from the God

who loves us. They never boast about how well they've done because they know that God has blessed them. And they don't cling to what they have out of some sense of their own deserving. They share with others and love other people because they know they are the recipients of God's own sharing and love.

And when hard times come, faithful people trust that this God they know and love will see them through. They don't resent God when bad things happen because their faith was never about being in control, or expecting God to prevent any harm from coming their way. No, even the hard things draw faithful people closer to God. "I will trust in him and not be afraid," they say with the prophet Isaiah. If you know any of those people, you know that it's true. They get through some remarkable challenges and they really are not fundamentally afraid. They don't need to be in control because they know that their Redeemer lives, and that the God they know in Jesus Christ loves them and will make all things right in God's good time.

The Serenity Prayer captures all of this in a nutshell, which is why it's so popular, especially among people who have tried all sorts of unhelpful ways to control everyone and everything—only to recognize the futility of all that in the end. "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things that can be changed, and the wisdom to know the one from the other." We are all responsible for doing what we can to provide for ourselves and others, and to make things better for everyone, insofar as we have the ability to make a difference. Beyond that, we trust in God, so we do not have to be afraid, and in that way we come to know

God's peace.

What's true in our personal lives is true in our public life as well, in the way we shape our communities and our nation as a whole. There are people who try to stir up our fears because it suits their interests to do that, but we need to resist the fearmongers, because they are dangerous and they bring out the worst in everyone.

People are never at their best when they act out of fear. Last week was the anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941. While there were legitimate concerns about safety in wartime, of course, our government rounded up tens of thousands of American citizens who were of Japanese descent and kept them in camps, causing some of them to lose their property and their livelihood. One of our own Westminster members was among the families affected. In the 1930s and 40s, we refused to receive thousands of Jewish refugees fleeing from the Nazis, and we sent their ships back so that many of them ended up in places like Auschwitz and Dachau. In the 1950s Hungarian refugees were turned away for a time, fleeing from Communism, because in the McCarthy era people were told that there might be Communist spies among those refugees. In the 1970s it took images of the "boat people" drowning as they tried to escape from Vietnam or Laos or Cambodia, before we finally took many of them in. The green stole that I wear to this day was made by refugees from Laos when Christ Church welcomed them in the 1980s, and the people were so grateful that some Christians in America received them when they had nowhere else to go.

People are never at their best when they're driven by fear. There was a time in the nineteenth century when Protestants in some American cities attacked Catholic churches because they said Catholics could never be trusted, since they listen to the Pope, who is a foreign influence and "not one of us." And then, of course, there have always been nativist and supremacist groups stirring up fear and hatred against anyone who they thought was not like them. We look back on those times and most of us are not proud. They were not our finest moments as a nation.

We are a nation of immigrants. Everyone here can trace our ancestry to some foreign country. Some of those ancestors were welcomed when they first arrived, others were not. We sing our national anthem at sporting events and all sorts of occasions, including our national holidays, and we call America "the home of the brave." But we are not brave when we act out of fear, and fear tends to conjure up behaviors that we're not proud of later on.

In our personal lives and in our life together, we need to take reasonable measures to provide for ourselves and others, of course, and to keep ourselves and the people we love safe and secure. But there are limits to what we can control, and when we've reached those limits we need to ask ourselves what kind of people we want to be, and whether we'll let the brutish behavior of a few make brutes of all the rest of us.

People of genuine faith in God know that we will face challenges in our own lives and in the life our nation, and some of those challenges will be hard. But when

those times come, we want to be able to say with Isaiah and Paul and all the saints among us, “Surely it is God who saves me. I will trust in him, and I will not be afraid.”



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