

“The Only Thing We Have to Fear Is...”

June 7, 2020

Unafraid series – Trinity Sunday/Peace with Justice Sunday – Livestream

I was outside exercising this week, and I passed a young kid on a bike. He had his helmet on, and not far behind him was a man driving a golf cart very slowly. I'm assuming it was a parent or trusted adult following the boy, and then I realized why. The boy was riding without training wheels - a little jiggly, but doing well.

He's not the first kid I've heard of who's learned to ride a bike lately. The time of being at home has afforded opportunities for focus, trying new things, and taking on new hobbies. But seeing that boy brought back my memories of learning to ride a bike. It took a while before I wasn't scared about riding without the safety of training wheels, but once it happened, what a ride and pure joy!

I worried a lot as a kid. Fear can protect us from harm, of course. A healthy sense of fear helps us to make good decisions for ourselves and for others. Sometimes I still worry too much, though. Sometimes fear gets the best of me and stops me. My focus on what's important gets misplaced. I feel overwhelmed and sometimes waste time and energy (and lose sleep)!

In these last few months, I've had moments when I felt fear and worry take over, and I've tried to remember what I can and can't control, trust that God is with me, and know deep down that I'm not alone. I know that there are people who pray for me, and that's a great comfort. I'm not sure that faith is so much an antidote to fear as it's a great companion, gift, and a help.

So fear can protect us from harm. Sometimes our fears are founded. Our experiences can be a reason that fear is very real. I don't want to minimize that reality. But fear can become a problem when it immobilizes us. Fear can become a hindrance to living the fullness of this life. Fear can paralyze us and stop us from moving forward, keeping going, and doing something. FDR knew this when he offered these famous words in 1933 – **PLAY VIDEO**. It's more than a sound bite, though. FDR said, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself--nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.”

As I read the book *Unafraid* and we planned this series, Covid-19 was at the forefront of our minds. That's still true, but in the past few weeks, we're also living in a tumultuous time, hearing the pain of black and brown voices who need to be heard because there are issues that must be addressed. I've found myself concerned and worried – mostly about how to respond faithfully as a Christian, about how to lead faithfully as a pastor, about how to show up, listen, learn, and care. How do we let faith – not fear - guide us when there's so much to learn and so much more to do?

More on that, but it's important to understand how we react to fear – not just how we feel, but understand why we feel the way we do. Back in March, when we were focusing on mental health after we started sheltering in place, I reached out to Angela Thompson, a member of our congregation and a licensed social worker with specialized training in trauma. She recorded a video on mental health information and tools to care for ourselves. I'll be sending out the link again (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4z9YcwEQ4-8>), and I asked her to share a specific part about our bodies and how we respond to fear.

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I understood some of the physiology, but it was such a help to understand it more fully. And it's so much a part of who we are and our relationship with God. The Bible is a book of faith. It tells a faith story that spans generations. It invites us into that faith story – even to see ourselves as a part of it. And we don't have to look very hard to see people who are fearful about the circumstances they face.

Isaiah is a hopeful prophet, even as he speaks God's word to the Israelites in a difficult time. Isaiah reminds them of God's faithfulness. God's power never wavers. Even when we grow tired and weary, even when we're fearful or worried or anxious, God is strong. And our faith in God is a source of strength. Claiming faith doesn't mean that we don't experience fear, but it does mean we don't rest on our own strength. Dorothy Bernard said, "Courage is fear that has said its prayers."

And the psalmist speaks words of courage. As we're hanging onto more sunlight in these days, we know the power of light especially on those days when the sun is almost overpowering. We know its power even as we know the pain of the world – continued worry over a virus, natural disasters all over the world, people recovering after flooding, voices crying out in protest and with truth, and grief for those who have lost loved ones.

Reality is where we live, but we're not people whose hope is in what's in front of us. Our hope isn't in other people. Yes, we might feel despair and even fear. But we can have hope beyond that. Hope is an alternative reality, and nothing can squash it. Hope is more powerful because it's beyond us. Our hope is not in ourselves or someone else, but in what God can do when we're willing to live with God's vision. We've been talking about 20/20 Vision – God's Vision. How are we seeking God's vision? Our hope is in the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth.

The one who sings the psalm has hope. He is confident in God. He knows God can be trusted, and he offers a witness to how good God is. He can't simply be quiet or anonymous; he sings praises. But the power of this psalm is that it's not just praise. The one who sings also lives in the reality. God is good, and life is difficult. Reality is what it is - gritty, dangerous, uncertain. There are "days of trouble," and God has been there.

There are times when we worry, when we're scared, and God is present to save and protect. God is there. God is with us.

The power here is that the one who speaks finds the assurance of God's salvation in community with others. Psalm 27 directs us as we worship – that we would seek the Lord. But even as we do, there's this call us to be honest about what we're facing – strife and struggle with others, lies, threats of abandonment, and blatant betrayal. This psalm speaks to where we are right now, and the humanity of it touches us.

We have real fears, and so do others. We need to share them with God. We need to create safe space to share them with each other. We need to make safe space – to listen and seek to understand. Voicing fear can bring the possibility of hope and change, and I hope that's where we're headed.

Many of you received a card about FEAR – False Events Appearing Real – and many times that's true. I also want to offer another way to think about fear and how we engage it. **SHOW SLIDE:**

- **F**ace your fears with faith.
- **E**xamine your assumptions in light of the facts.
- **A**ttack your anxieties with action.
- **R**elease your cares to God.

One writer described this psalm as someone talking to himself – convincing himself that even as he is afraid, God is present, God is real, and God is at work. It's the back and forth between fear and faith that's surprising. We don't get a neat package, and maybe that's what so compelling.

When we speak of our faith and even the struggle of faith, we're showing honesty and integrity that the psalmist shows. We share the truth about the mystery of faith, the awe of God's presence, the pain of suffering, and the grace that is very real to us. We're showing faith in God for what it is – waiting on the Lord even when the outcome is unclear, doing the hard work of faith and trust in God when we're not sure what to do, being humble and teachable. Perhaps in this moment it means spending time with God in prayer and asking God to make clear where we need to repent and turn back to God, maybe it means taking risks to have important conversations about racism and privilege – listening for how God is speaking through others, calling us to deeper faith, and a more inclusive and beloved community.

The only thing we have to fear is...You have your words to fill in. My prayer is that we trust in God who will guide us to walk by faith, in faith, with faith. Thanks be to God. AMEN.