

“Be Not Afraid”

Sunday, August 21, 2016
14th Sunday after Pentecost

 **(Luke 12:4-12, NRSV)**

Exhortation to Fearless Confession

“I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that can do nothing more. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!

Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten in God’s sight. But even the hairs of your head are all counted. Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

“And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before others, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God; but whoever denies me before others will be denied before the angels of God. And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be

forgiven. When they bring you before the synagogues, the rulers, and the authorities, do not worry about how you are to defend yourselves or what you are to say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say.”

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

Thanks be to God.

[2nd Service: *Affirmation of Faith*]

[MESSAGE]

[Remember I said the past two weeks that the first half of Isaiah was written before the Exile and that it was kind of depressing stuff to preach on.

Isaiah was full of harsh judgement and fair warning about the consequences of bad choices and selfish behavior.

Verse 40:10 (cited in the video clip) is part of the “EXILIC ISAIAH” and offers hope to those who are suffering the consequences.]

“Do not be afraid” – Throughout the Old and New Testaments these words signal the coming rescue of God.

By some counts the command to have no fear appears 366 times in one form or another.

While there is still some debate on the accuracy of this number, the point is: **this is important.**

The words “*be not afraid*” are among **the most important** in the whole Bible.

Let us pray...Lord, this morning you remind us again that we should trust in you and have no fear. This can be a real challenge for us and we pray that you will lead us from where we are to where you want us to be. Help us to trust you more and fear less. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

In a Worship Design Team meeting not long ago we were talking about possible topics for upcoming sermons. One of the team members suggested a sermon on the “*be not afraid*” statements in the Bible.

Our Monday evening Bible Study group is working through a book called: ***If You Want to Walk on Water You Have to Get Out of the Boat***, by John Ortberg. In this study we have talked

about how fear sometimes holds us back from doing all that God asks us to do.

The news media and many of our politicians would have us believe that we have so much to fear in this world and only “*they*” have the answers that will save us. Fear seems to be the great motivator these days.

Then, the last two weeks we have heard Isaiah make every effort to scare the Israelites into changing their evil ways and turning back toward God. That didn’t work out so well for them.

Now seems like a great time for **us** to take a look at the “*be not afraid*” command and imagine what it could mean for us.

The text I picked to start us off this morning comes at a time in Luke’s gospel where Jesus seems to be getting very popular.

The crowds are getting larger – so large, in fact, that verse 1 of this chapter says: “*the crowd gathered by the thousands, so that they trampled on one another.*”

The Pharisees are getting more nervous; Luke tells us they are, “*lying in wait for him, to catch him in something he might say*” (11:54).

Jesus takes his most-trusted disciples aside and begins to offer them a cautionary message about the challenge they face.

It seems that the issue is no longer that people will reject them; instead it is that some people are too nonchalant about their acceptance of the message. The warning may be that Jesus is not interested in people who just hang around and do nothing to change.

He tells them not to be afraid to confess their faith and makes it clear that the most serious threat is not physical hardship; the real threat is spiritual complacency.

So, how do we imagine the command “***be not afraid***” might be helpful to us?

We could go through some of the most familiar examples:

- Gabriel greets Mary with the words, “*do not be afraid*,” right before he tells her she is going to be the mother of the Messiah. **No pressure!**
- The angels appear to the shepherds outside Bethlehem in the middle of the night saying: “*Do not be afraid!*”
- The angel at Jesus’ tomb said to the women, “*Don’t be afraid*,” then he told them that Jesus was really alive.

These are all familiar stories and we can see now what those people could not see – **the results of their fearlessness.**

Maybe that is part of the point of the command: be not afraid: We can see how it worked out for those people in all those 366 examples.

Easy-peasy, right?!

Therefore, we shall not be afraid!

Clearly, it’s not that simple.

Anxiety, fear, and worry can be caused by many things that are part of our normal way of life.

We become anxious in unfamiliar settings, meeting new people, or starting a new job.

We hesitate sometimes because we fear failing, we are afraid of embarrassing ourselves, or we are simply unsure of our own ability.

We worry that our car will break down on the freeway; worry about contracting some dread disease; and worry whether our children are safe.

It seems that some of our anxiety is justified and that God expects too much when he says: “be not afraid.”

It’s true, some level of cautious fear is sensible.

Fear of things that can harm you is a good thing.

Fear can be motivating; it can also be paralyzing.

I believe it is paralyzing fear that God seeks to relieve by asking us to trust him.

That really is what God is talking about in all those 366 commands to “fear not.”

In Deuteronomy God tell the Israelites not to fear going into battle against their enemies; God told them to trust that he would be with them to victory.

In 2 Kings 1:15 God told Elijah not to be afraid to go and prophesy to the king; Elijah was to trust God to protect him.

Through Isaiah, God told the Israelites in exile: “*do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you.*”

You get the idea – Fear keeps us from trusting God.

In the study I referenced earlier, John Ortberg suggests: “*I think God says ‘fear not’ so often because fear is the number one reason human beings are tempted to avoid doing what God asks them to do.*” (P 118)

Fear and worry whisper to us that God is not big enough or strong enough to take care of us.

Our hopes, dreams, and callings are impaired by our fear; God’s work in us and through us is blocked.

What's worse, our children learn to be fearful from what they see in us.

Their hopes, their dreams, and their callings may be limited when we teach them to live in fear,

Trust is also contagious.

Others notice; our children notice...

When we trust God and step out in faith to take sensible risks to discover God's plan for our lives.

I want to go back to Matthew 28 for just a minute and think about the angel's words, "***do not be afraid.***"

This is part of our redemption story.

The disciples are pulled from their fear and failure to new life, courage, and a new mission.

They are not scolded for their doubt and betrayal; they are redeemed.

Sometimes when we sense God's presence and call, we fall into fear.

When that happens God doesn't scold us, but instead calls us to get up and be bound by fear no longer.

“Be not afraid” is a victory cry of resurrection, a call to courage, and a promise of new life.

👉 In Luke's gospel this morning, Jesus tells his trusted friends not be afraid of anything that the world might throw at them.

He tells them that God will take care of them as long as they do not reject the Holy Spirit.

He encourages them by saying they need not worry what they will say when called upon – the Holy Spirit will give them plenty to say.

This message is for us as well.

“Do not be afraid!”

God's Word is, indeed, living and active.

It is able to raise the dead to life and more than capable of equipping us with courage and compassion sufficient to the challenges and opportunities of our modern world.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the
Holy Spirit. Amen.