

“Putting Fear in Its Place”

Matthew 10:24-39

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The Rev. Dr. David A. Van Dyke
The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Saint Paul, Minnesota

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Jesus didn't always speak pastorally, you know. Sometime he spoke truthfully and forcefully, which is what he's doing in today's text. He's not addressing a large group but rather his disciples, among whom he must have sensed great confusion and apprehension. And why were they so anxious?

Well, perhaps it's because he's told them repeatedly that he was going to die? He warned them that the life of discipleship is a tough road that often involves things like speaking unpopular truths, standing up to power in the face of injustice, and requiring one to pick up a cross and die to themselves. He told them he was sending them out like sheep in the midst of wolves. No one likes to hear things like that.

Several years ago, at another church I served, I remember leaving the building on a Saturday afternoon following a wedding. I was greeted by a man with a bucket and a sponge. He saw my clerical collar and I was dead meat. “Hey Father! You are a priest, or something, right?” Knowing that I fell into the “or something” category, I said, “Yes.”

He said, “Man, I need someone to talk to. My life is a mess. My wife is an addict, working the streets to pay for her habit. I have no job and just got evicted. I've been sleeping on a friend's couch and spending my days walking around with this bucket and sponge, trying to find some cars to wash.” As he was telling me his story, a gentle rain began falling, something that had seemed eminent all day and further decreasing his odds of finding anyone who wanted a car wash. He finally said, “Man, I believe in God, even in Jesus as my Lord and Savior, so why are all these bad things happening to me?”

You see he thought that faith protects us from the things in this world that cause us harm—the things to which we find ourselves susceptible. But that is not the case. Faith doesn't free us from those things, it gives us the power to not fear them. Remember, I have said numerous times from this pulpit, that faith gets us out of nothing, it sees us through everything!

“The disciple is not above the teacher nor the slave above the master,” Jesus said. In other words, Jesus is telling them that if he himself is not immune from the world's misunderstanding and harsh treatment, then neither should they expect to be as his followers.

But then Jesus zeros in on one of his more familiar themes, namely fear, and attempts to *bid their anxious fears subside*, in the words of the great hymn. Three times in this brief text Jesus addresses their fear and tells them not to be afraid. Is that overkill? Or was it a message they needed to hear? Is it a message we need to hear today?

It is my sense, as a pastor, and in talking to friends of mine who are pastors, that we are living in a time of deep fear and anxiety. Unprecedented levels of dysfunction within our government; the complete maligning of truth as though there is no truth anymore and facts don't matter; the loss of faith in our public institutions; violent threats both foreign and domestic, are all causing many to live in a perpetual state of fear.

And the political hijacking of Christianity that distorts the gospel and blasphemes the very God of love and peace, has only perpetuated fear of outsiders and those who are different, and it is frankly, an abomination.

The writer of Matthew's gospel used the word "synagogue" more than the other gospel writers. For him, the Jews and their synagogue represented a world where increasingly, Jesus and his followers did not feel at home. And all of his references to the synagogue are negative in their context. And while the extent to which Jesus and his followers were harassed by the temple crowd is debatable, what isn't debatable is that in a post Easter world the followers of the risen Christ were.

So inadvertently, Matthew's gospel may have contributed to an increasing polarization that seems to be endemic among human beings anytime identities become forged and allegiances defined. Because challenging core beliefs and loyalties, as Jesus and his followers did, can cause some people to feel threatened.

But I've also discovered this: those who are threatened by the different beliefs of others, tend to be those whose own beliefs aren't perhaps well founded or thoroughly thought through. Or they are folks who haven't acknowledged that an element of uncertainty rests in any legitimate belief held in faith.

And sadly, as long as that is true, fear is perhaps the greatest motivational force we know. And while many of our fears are unfounded or even irrational, we nonetheless do have some very real and legitimate things to fear. But when fear paralyzes us, or leads us to make bad choices, we have to ask where our sense of God is in all of that? Because the kind of faith that can see us through anything should never allow us to become paralyzed by our fears.

You know, there has never been a generation that didn't, in one way or another, think theirs had it the worst—that didn't experience times of profound anxiety and fear because things felt like they were spinning out of control. During the Great Depression, when Franklin Roosevelt tried to assure the American people that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself, he was speaking politically, of course.

But I wonder if he was aware of the fact that he was also speaking theologically, and speaking some good theology at that? Because time and time again, throughout his ministry and constantly woven through the gospels, Jesus tried to reassure his followers not to be afraid.

Fear not. Do not be afraid. I sometimes think the entire gospel can be summed up in two simple words: Fear not!

It was Jesus in the boat as the storm raged and everyone was terrified who said, "Do not be afraid." It was both at the empty tomb and again in a locked room a short time later that the Risen Christ assured his frightened followers, "Do not be afraid."

Our faith makes the bold claim that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ didn't just open a door for opportunity, if only we'll pull ourselves together, get organized and seize the moment. The life, death and resurrection accomplished something profoundly good, and with eternal consequences for us and for the world, whether we recognize it or not. Whatever the future holds, it will unfold under the reign of God brought about by the crucified and risen Lord. And because of that good news, we ultimately have nothing to fear.

At my grandfather's funeral in 1980, a soloist sang that old, familiar gospel song, *His Eye Is On the Sparrow*. It was a favorite of his, so much so that on occasion, we'd sing it together as a family blessing before a meal, much to his delight. As a banker and a businessman, but as a true gentleman farmer at

heart, he loved that song I think because it hallowed a sparrow, a creature otherwise seen as tiny and insignificant.

My grandfather graduated from college and started out in life in 1918. That same year 20 million people in the world died from influenza. Some 500,000 Americans died that year from the flu, more than died in all of World War I.

And I suspect that like many of his generation, who lived through two world wars and many other conflicts, not to mention the Great Depression, and who had every conceivable reason to believe that the world as they knew it was out of control and that things were getting worse and not better—for them to read their Bibles and be reassured that God had not given up on the world—that in fact, in ways mysterious and far beyond their comprehension or knowing, all things would somehow, in some way work together for good, according to God.

And then to hear in church, or sung around a bountiful table of Thanksgiving, a table that got spread every year in good times and in bad, that song about how God cared for the creation and each one of us—to trust that in a broken and fearful world, even the tiniest sparrow isn't lost on God, is to know a comfort like no other.

*Why should I be discouraged?
Why should the shadows come?
Why should my heart be lonely, and long for heaven and home?
When Jesus is my portion, my constant friend is he
His eye is on the sparrow and I know he watches me.*

*I sing because I'm happy.
I sing because I'm free.
His eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me.*

People of God, in whatever you may be facing, in whatever trials come your way, in whatever situation at the moment seems hopeless, hear again the words of the one who is our portion and constant friend, Jesus Christ our Lord, who says to each of us this day,

Do not be afraid.

Amen.