

“Keep Calm and Disciple On!”
Reverend Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
3rd Sunday of Lent
March 15, 2020

First Scripture Reading: Romans 8:35, 37-39

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Second Scripture Reading: Matthew 14:22-27

²²Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. ²⁵And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. ²⁶But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. ²⁷But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”



Keep Calm and Disciple On!

January 1933, when Franklin Delano Roosevelt began his first term as President, was a daunting time in this nation’s history. Aware of the gravity of the situation into which he was stepping, Roosevelt began his inaugural speech with these words:

“I am certain that my fellow Americans expect that on my induction into the Presidency I will address them with a candor and a decision which the present situation of our people impel. This is preeminently the time to speak the truth, the whole truth, frankly and boldly. Nor need we shrink from honestly facing conditions in our country today. This great Nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and will prosper. So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.”¹

Roosevelt was speaking from the depths of the Great Depression, addressing a nation staggered by three years of bank failures, lost savings, lost homes, and unemployment. Now what Roosevelt didn’t say and what we have found to be remarkably true in this new era of partisan politics, is that there are plenty of other things to fear, ignorance being chief amongst them. But his basic premise endures: fear that incapacitates, that overwhelms reason and critical thinking is indeed above all things to be avoided.

News of the COVID-19 or Coronavirus Pandemic has certainly exploded in the last several days. Disneyland and Disneyworld have shut down, the NCAA tournament has been cancelled, schools in Ohio have been shuttered for at least the next three weeks, and our president has declared a national state of emergency. And in a development that would have seemed unthinkable just a few days ago, Overbrook Presbyterian Church along with a number of other churches around the country have all closed our doors for a time in order to stem the spread of this virus. We’ve never before seen this level of societal disruption. It would be understandable if fear is exactly what you are all feeling at this time.

But our scriptural tradition teaches us a thing or two about fear. First of all, there are a ton of things that happen to people in the Old and New testaments that that would likely scare the bejeebies out of just about anybody. Moses, tending his sheep, minding his own business, suddenly meets God in a burning bush. The Israelites, chased by an advancing Army, faced with the prospect of being forced back into slavery, stand between that army and the deep Red Sea. As a pillar of fire sent by God (!) insinuates itself between the people and that army, that Red Sea just splits wide open and the people are commanded to walk into it. The most amazing part of that story might be not the supernatural events, but that the

people actually had the courage to walk out onto the dry seabed! Daniel refuses to pray as the King commands him and gets thrown into a pit of ravenous lions as punishment. Wars, pestilence, famine: frankly a lot of what happens in the Bible is pretty frightening and over and over again we hear the words “Fear not” which the NRSV translates “Don’t be afraid.”

We hear it when Mary is visited by an Angel who tells her that she is pregnant and that the child she will bear will be the Messiah. We hear it when the Angels appear to the shepherds to tell them about Jesus’ birth. We hear it in the midst of a storm-tossed sea, when Jesus comes walking out to the disciples on the water. And we hear it when the Angel appears to the women who have come to Jesus’ tomb on Easter morning.

“Fear not.”

I have found in my life that self-awareness is not a gift that all people possess. Often times people do not realize how they are coming across to other people or the impression they are making. Angels never have this problem. Whenever an angel of the Lord appears to someone in scripture with the bright white clothing and the bright light and loud sounds of rushing wind... they know they pose a pretty intimidating sight... which is why the first thing out of their mouths is invariably “Fear not.” Because obviously there is reason to be afraid. Supernatural beings don’t show up every day so when you see something strange and mysterious like an angel, you might just lose your sanity. And it was also widely understood back then that if you saw God, you would drop dead, so seeing an Angel, who might also have been God, surely meant your time had come.

But again, and again, we hear these words: “Fear not. Do not be afraid.”

There is a reason why the emissaries of God begin with those words. First, because they are trying to calm a person who is undergoing stress and anxiety. “Fear not” is a pastoral word. “Hey, it’s okay... it’s just me.”

Have you ever been just sitting there, minding your own business, maybe reading the paper or watching TV, when someone walks in and startles you? Or you look up and see someone standing there when you didn’t expect it? I’m not talking about someone trying to scare you by yelling “boo,” just your every day, run-of-the-mill “I didn’t know you were there” startling. The other day I walked through the sanctuary and opened the door to Mary’s office just as she was walking out, and I startled her. When she opened the door into the dark sanctuary, she didn’t expect there to be someone there in the dark. It took her a minute to settle back down. So, when we read the words “Fear not,” in the Bible, the first purpose of those words is to say “Hey, it’s okay. It’s only me. Don’t be afraid.”

But there’s a second reason those words are so important. We hear “fear not” first as a word of comfort, but in the Hebrew “Fear not” is also a command. Angels..., Jesus..., they begin with “fear not” because people are wildly ineffective when they are responding to a situation out of fear. Fear is counterproductive. If you’re cowering in fear or running around in a panic, you’re not going to hear what God needs you to hear. You aren’t going to be able to respond in productive ways. Whatever it is that God is trying to accomplish will fail. The whole exercise will be a waste. So the words “fear not” say to us “don’t worry. Everything is going to be okay,” but they also say to us “Stop acting out in fear. It’s not helping.”

One of the most important things you can do in an emergency is to remain calm. One researcher has written that remaining calm flies in the face of our natural reaction and so it takes intentional effort to remain calm.

“...When faced with an emergency, you are biologically created to be reactive, rather than thoughtful or critical in your thinking. As a result, panic makes you behave in an emotional manner rather than a thoughtful manner, as you react emotionally to the danger facing you. [But] because you are no longer living in a primitive society where such impulsive and reactive behavior might [actually] save your life, you have to deliberately adjust your behavior to accommodate the kind of threat and emergency you are now encountering. And you are at a great disadvantage whenever you approach any emergency emotionally, rather than logically.”²

We face a time of uncertainty, where just being at home in the world brings with it an element of risk. We hear warnings about Coronavirus and every cough or snuffle could be a harbinger of plague. The news is filled with dire warnings. Precautions are encouraged. Social distance is the new normal as reliable institutions close their doors to the public.

In a situation like this which most of us have never experienced before, it is natural to *feel* afraid. Fear is a normal, natural emotion. But we can decide whether or not to let that fear take control of our lives. And we need to make the intentional effort to act as logically as possible and not 100% out of emotion.

Fear unrestrained is panic. That's what drives us to make poor decisions like hoarding toilet paper. But fear that is controlled, expresses itself in caution and prudence. We take wise precautions when we keep ourselves informed, stay home as much as possible, avoid crowds, and wash our hands often: 20 seconds with soap and water. If you're not sure how long that is, just sing "Happy Birthday" through twice before rinsing and you're good. If you don't need to go, maybe don't go out and about in public. Remember, the point of these precautions is not just to protect ourselves from getting sick, but also to protect others by not spreading around the virus unintentionally.

Stay informed by checking reputable news outlets for updates. NPR³ is a good place to start. Be sure to check the websites for the Centers for Disease Control,⁴ Columbus Department of Public Health,⁵ and the State of Ohio's website at Coronavirus.ohio.gov. All of these are excellent sources of information on what is going on and what you can do to be smart and stay safe.

In the face of such uncertainty we need to hear the words of Jesus; "don't be afraid" and take them to heart. These are certainly strange times. And they may well get a little stranger before we are through. But the best thing we can do is keep calm, and disciple on. Because even in these times, God is in control. It has always been so and always will be.

"Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ ""Only Thing We Have to Fear Is Fear Itself": FDR's First Inaugural Address." 13 Mar. 2020, historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5057.

² Gross, Dr. Gail. "Staying Calm During an Emergency Can Save Lives." HuffPost, 7 July 2016, www.huffpost.com/entry/staying-calm-during-an-em_b_7749812.

³ <https://www.npr.org/>

⁴ <https://www.cdc.gov/>

⁵ <https://www.columbus.gov/publichealth/>