

How Not to Be Afraid

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



"Fear into Courage Transformation 2. Day Two." by Dmitri Matkovsky

Prayer of Illumination

Prepare our hearts, O God, to accept your Word.
Silence in us any voices but your own,
so that we may hear your Word and also do it,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Background

Lamentations is a good book for us to read these days.
The five poems found within it are a witness to human suffering.

In this third lament,
God not only listens to the man and comes near,
but God speaks, saying, "*Be not afraid.*"
And then God acts—defending the man's cause
and redeeming his life.

This is why we fear not.

Let's hear now the word of the Lord from:

Scripture: Lamentations 3:52-58 (NRSV)

Those who were my enemies without cause
have hunted me like a bird;
they flung me alive into a pit
and hurled stones on me;
water closed over my head;
I said, "I am lost."
I called on your name, O LORD,
from the depths of the pit;
you heard my plea, "Do not close your ear
to my cry for help, but give me relief!"
You came near when I called on you;
you said, "Do not fear!"
You have taken up my cause, O Lord,
you have redeemed my life.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – How Not to Be Afraid

A war waged without, but a greater war waged within.

The people were quarantined. Stores and schools were closed. Even churches were closed. Everyone wore masks.

The Arizona Daily Star warned readers:

"Don't catch the hysteria! Don't worry! Don't get scared."

The Arizona Board of Health chided residents of our state,

"Fear is worse than the flu. It's only the flu."

Rumors began to spread in Phoenix that dogs spread the virus. Soon countless dogs were killed by police and dog owners alike. The newspapers reported that Phoenix would soon become a dogless city.

Even though Arizona wasn't hit as hard as some other regions, it was pandemic pandemonium. It wasn't only the virus running amuck—fear too was running rampant. Not just in Arizona, but fear gripped the nation, the world. It was and is still the world's most devastating pandemic.

The Spanish Influenza of 1918-1919.

Between 50 to 100 million of the 1.8 billion people of the world died from the three waves of the Spanish flu. More US soldiers died of the flu than from combat in WW1. Newspapers were censored from writing about the flu because they thought the truth might hurt the country's morale during the war to end all wars.

But the opposite happened: The lack of truth led to an increase of fear.

Just for background—the Spanish flu didn't originate in Spain. It was called that because the newspapers in Spain were the first to mention the unmentionable: plague had arrived. Because they were neutral in WW1, the press had more freedom.

Scientists now believe the Spanish flu likely started in Haskell County, Kansas and from there spread worldwide as troops were deployed around the world.

Thank God our present pandemic isn't nearly as deadly, but fear is still all around us.

- People of color have fears for their safety at the hands of the police.
- Cops fear for their safety in their very dangerous jobs.
- Gun sales went up 80% this May compared to last May.
- Whites have fears of losing privilege and power.
- There are fears about getting sick or damage done to property.
- Fears about the security of our jobs and the economy.
- Fears about when to re-open and how best to re-open.
- Fears that we may never get to a new normal.

We can relate with the imagery of the hunted bird in our passage, thrown into an open grave and pelted by stones while the floodwaters continued to rise.

But then we hear God's whispered words: "Be not afraid." It's the most oft repeated command in Scripture. Jesus expands upon it in the gospels: Do not fear—only believe.

I think a better translation of the phrase "be not afraid" is: Be not terrified. Don't panic. You can be scared—just don't freak out.

You see, before we can learn how NOT to be afraid, we need to learn HOW to be afraid. And we need to learn WHEN to be afraid. And WHO to be afraid of. I'm afraid to think what our lives would be like if we had NO FEAR.

The book of Proverbs puts it this way,
"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

...

It's a good thing to have the fear of God put into you. Paul challenges us in the book of Philippians "to work out your faith with fear and trembling." Good and godly fear is reverence and awe before the Holy. It's respect—for our Creator and the Creator's creation. We aren't flippant or irreverent with this kind of fear.

The Bible teaches we need the emotion of fear—in healthy and appropriate doses. But don't overdose on fear—it can and will kill your spirit. Fear can be addictive too. Healthy and holy fear keeps you safe. Fear cautions us not to be naïve or cavalier in the face of danger. Properly interpreted fear can also be your friend.

It can help you prepare and make thoughtful and wise decisions. Fear can protect you and others from making rash or reckless choices that we'll all regret. Let's not only entertain angels, let's learn from them: "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread."

Fear also warns us when something's off or just not right—that something doesn't pass the sniff test. That something should be avoided, confronted, or changed.

Psychologist Abigail Marsh has shown that when the emotion of fear is rightly understood, it can help us

- pick up when people are in distress
- inspire us to not only empathize with their plight, but motivate us to action and compassion—
- Fear is a signal to intervene in a time of need, rather than avoiding the person and leaving them in a ditch.
- Fear helps you put yourself in the shoes of the other and walk a mile or so.
- Exposure to appropriate fear makes you feel alive and aware. It gets your blood pumping. Endorphins flowing in your system.
- When we experience fear with others, it can actually bond us together.

FDR famously said,

"There's nothing to fear except fear itself,"

but his wife Eleanor Roosevelt offered this challenge:

"Do one thing every day that scares you."

Fear can take you out of your comfort zone—stretch you, push you, and grow you. It can take you to new places you've never dared to go before.

Small doses of fear—not sustained or exaggerated fear—boost your immune system and burn lots of calories. In fact, studies have shown that watching a suspenseful movie burns as many calories as a thirty-minute walk! What a great way to lose those quarantine pounds!

I like how Helen Keller put it,

"Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. The fearful are caught as often as the bold."

So we've talked about good ways to be afraid. Let's now look at the shadow side of fear.

There's most certainly bad fear out there—terror, panic, frenzy, general just freaking out.

Too much fear is kind of like too much baggage. It weighs you down. Immobilizes you. When we're frozen in fear, we become paralyzed and crippled by fear.

We get decidophobia—and can't make up our minds or act when we should. And when we do act—we act out. Behavior driven by fear is usually suspicious, inappropriate, aggressive, or just plain weird.

Irrational fear leads us to: lash out at others because our trust levels are low. We feel threatened. We misinterpret things. When that happens, we take out our anger on the wrong people and in the wrong places. We blame the innocent. Demonize those we don't understand or feel threatened by.

And so unfounded fear alienates, divides, and polarizes people. Because we don't trust one other, because of our suspicious minds, We don't work together. Wedges are created. We avoid each other and stay with our own kind. All of life becomes: US vs. THEM.

Fear creates straw men. Writes whole groups of people off. You put yourself in the best light, and the OTHER SIDE in the worst light. We have it all figured out. We've arrived.

- All liberals think this way—they're socialists and unpatriotic—every single one of them. You can't trust them. Ever.
- Conservatives? They're all narrow-minded. Heartless. They only think about two things: the economy and abortion. Oh, and they're mean too.
- And those moderates? They're wishy-washy and mamby-pamby. Have no guts. They're traitors to both parties and flip-floppers. Every one of them.

I think all liberals, conservatives, and moderates would beg to differ with each of those sweeping generalizations.

- Let's get to know one another again.
- Let's stop insulating ourselves from differing ideas.
- Let's bust out of the isolation of our echo chambers.

Breathe deep! Life involves degrees and nuance. When fear is banished, listening, learning, and leaning upon one another is possible! Be not afraid!

Let go of what needs to be released and relinquished. Seek understanding and perspective.

Fear run amuck gives us tunnel vision—we can only see the negative. Only the threat. Only the loss. Only what we want to see.

When we're afraid, our options seem so limited. And we miss so many opportunities. When fear consumes us, we end up worshipping the safety and comfort of our cherished ideas, rather than our all-powerful God, who blows them to smithereens.

I like how Marcus Aurelius put it:

"It is not death that a man should fear,
but he should fear never beginning to live."

"Fear not" put positively is a summons to TRUST. Not in ourselves, but in God.

When we trust God, we can be brave...and not foolish. Careful...but not a chicken. When we trust God, we do what needs to be done. We don't do what shouldn't be done.

Trust is open:

- open to the Spirit,
- open to the possibility that we were wrong,
- open to new ways of doing things—rather than being chained to the past.

Trust is cupped hands, not clenched fists.

"To fear not" means to not only trust God, but to be positively courageous. Courage isn't pretending that there's nothing to fear. Rather courage helps us face and assess our fear, rather than ignoring or denying it. Let's shed our accusations, assumptions, and tired arguments and dig a little deeper, get curious.

Earlier in Lamentations 3 we hear this,

Let us examine our path, let us ponder it and return to the Lord.
Let us raise our hearts and hands to God in heaven.

Mr. Rogers had it right, "If it's mentionable, it's manageable."

Honesty about our situation helps calm our fears. Courage shrinks fear down to proper size by speaking truth. Talking about and facing our fears makes them concrete. Pretending is over. We can work with something tangible. Falsehood fosters fear, but when truth is shared and valued, Trust is built. John tells us in his letter, "Perfect love casts out all what? FEAR.

Let's be real and have a heart to heart talk, Immanuel. A courageous conversation.

Our country has had struggles with racism since the very beginning. This isn't an opinion, it's our history. It's a human problem. Every nation struggles with it—ours is just a little bigger than most. It's time to talk about what the man in Lamentations models: repentance. Changing our ways, rather than repeating them or justifying them.

The Scriptures say, "God is a lover of justice." And God is a just God. Let's be more godly and stand up for justice—for those who don't have a voice. Be who you are—male and female are made in God's likeness.

Listen to these words found in Lamentations 3:34-36:

“When human rights are overridden in defiance of the Most High, when someone is cheated of justice, does not the Lord see it?”

Do you see it? Now is the time to speak up for George Floyd and the countless people of color who have suffered injustice under the police. Now is the time for a major overhaul of our policing policies and policing tactics in America. It’s also a time to stand with the many, many good cops out there who are putting their lives on the line. They too are grieved by what’s going on And they need our encouragement. Stand with people of color and stand with cops—we can do both.

This is a time to speak clearly and maturely, a time to peacefully protest injustice. It’s also a time to resist and condemn violence—whether it be police brutality or looting or the destruction of property. Those who defy the law of the land should be arrested. You don’t have to choose sides. This is a both/and moment. You can be pro-police and pro-police reform, at the same time. You can be for peaceful protesting and strongly against looting and violence, at the same time. We can multi-task here. Use your imagination.

You can be a REPUBLICAN and you can be a DEMOCRAT, LIBERAL or CONSERVATIVE or MODERATE, TRADITIONALIST or PROGRESSIVE and both pursue racial reconciliation and uphold law and order—at the same time and together. It’s not either/or.

What’s the word for us during the pandemic pandemonium?

- Don’t flip out.
- Trust God.
- Be informed.
- Be courageous.
- Come together.
- Work together for what needs to be done.
- Love together across our differences.

THAT’S how NOT to be afraid.

Amen.

Sermon Art: *"Fear into Courage Transformation 2. Day Two."* by Dmitri Matkovsky,
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