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Deuteronomy 31:1-8
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Do Not Fear

In 2022, American's were surveyed about what they feared the most, meaning that they were either afraid or very afraid of happening.

10. Biological Warfare.
9. Pollution of our oceans, rivers, and lakes.
8. Economic/financial collapse.
7. Not having enough money for the future.
6. Pollution in our drinking water.
5. The U.S. involved in another world war.
4. People I love dying.
3. Russia using nuclear weapons.
2. People I love becoming seriously ill.
1. Corrupt government officials.

All very legitimate concerns. If I were to survey us today, I'm sure some of these might be on our lists as well.

But one message we hear often in the bible, is DO NOT FEAR! Or do not be afraid. This command appears some sixty six times in the Old Testament and fourteen times in the New Testament, eight times alone in the Gospel of Luke.

The scripture that Erin selected for us today, comes from Deuteronomy 31:1-8. At the end of Moses' life, he passed along his last words of testament to Joshua his successor. One thing he said was, "Do not be afraid or be terrified of who or what lies before you." Joshua was to lead God's people across the Jordan River and into the Promised Land. The problem was that previous reports mentioned just how big and mean and dangerous the people living there were. So needless to say, the Israelites' hearts melted with fear.

That's where we pick up the story today as Moses gave Joshua this final charge.

31 Then Moses went out and spoke these words to all Israel: **2** "I am now a hundred and twenty years old and I am no longer able to lead you. The Lord has said to me, 'You shall not cross the Jordan.' **3** The Lord your God himself will cross over ahead of you. He will destroy these nations before you, and you will take possession of their land. Joshua also will cross over ahead of you, as the Lord said. **4** And the Lord will do to them what he did to Sihon and Og, the kings of the

Amorites, whom he destroyed along with their land. **5** The Lord will deliver them to you, and you must do to them all that I have commanded you. **6** Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.”

7 Then Moses summoned Joshua and said to him in the presence of all Israel, “Be strong and courageous, for you must go with this people into the land that the Lord swore to their ancestors to give them, and you must divide it among them as their inheritance. **8** The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.”

Let us pray.

We need to be careful in how we apply this text to our lives. Particularly as this scripture has been used out of context to justify conquering other people’s lands. In our post Colonial age, there are numerous examples where countries have done just that “in God’s name.” So instead, I want to look at many other places in scripture where we are told “Do not be afraid; or do not be discouraged by the circumstances that lie before us.”

The Hebrew word for afraid is yare. It has a very wide range of meaning such as affright, to be made afraid, dreadful, put in fearful reverence, or even a terrible act.

Fear can cripple us and prevent us from being who we were created to be and doing what God wants us to do. It can hinder our relationships with others. It can literally stop us dead in our tracks. This morning I want to address several fears that we might face. Fear of others. Fear of the future. Fear of ourselves. And finally we will hear some scriptures that will reset our focus.

The first fear that I want to talk about is the fear of others. That they might harm us, think bad of us, or even say bad things about us. We actually see this kind of fear expressed in Moses life when he questioned God’s call to liberate the Israelites from Egyptian slavery.

Moses asked God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”

And God said, “I will be with you. And this will be a sign to you that it is I who have sent you. When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain.”

Clearly Moses was afraid of what Pharaoh would do to him physically. If we recall, the last time Moses was in Egypt he had killed an Egyptian slave master who was mistreating a fellow Israelite. Moses became angry and took justice into his own hands, killing this man. As a result, Moses fled to the desert in exile and feared for his life because Pharaoh was out to get him and bring Moses to justice. So he had reason to fear Pharaoh.

But notice how God allayed these fears by telling Moses, “I will be with you.”
Next we see how Moses feared his own people.

Then Moses said to God, “Supposed I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you, and they ask me, ‘What is his name? Then what shall I tell them?’”

God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”

Moses answered, “But what if they don’t believe me or listen to me?”

God said, “I will give you a sign.”

It wasn’t so much that Moses was afraid of them physically, but Moses feared that the Israelites would not take him seriously and would reject his leadership as having been sent by God.

We can see how Moses’ insecurities began to creep in and destroy his self confidence. He started coming up with all sorts of excuses of why he shouldn’t do what God had called him to do.

He said, “O Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue...send someone else.”¹

Then God said, “I’ll send your brother, Aaron, to speak for you.”

Each time, God met Moses where he was at and answered his specific fear with a solution to his concern.

Imagine if Moses had let fear win and he gave up saying, “God I won’t do it. Find someone else.” Then we might not even have had this part of his story today, where he was about to lead the people into the Promised Land.

As for me, I am a two on the Enneagram which is The Helper. Twos are empathetic, sincere, and warm-hearted. We are friendly, generous, and self-sacrificing, but we can also be sentimental, flattering, and people-pleasing. Our deepest fear is being alone and unloved. We cope with this fear by taking care of others and making ourselves central to other people's lives. We want to feel loved and appreciated, which motivates us to express love toward others in their words and actions.

Twos are great fits for ministry and serving others, except for the fact there are always more needs than we can possibly meet. Which means that we drop the ball often, let people down, and fail to meet their expectations. We fear not measuring up and when we don’t, we can build up defenses to keep people at arms length and resist letting people into our lives. It becomes a huge spiral downward and we end up in very isolated, unhealthy places.

¹ Exodus 3:1-4:17

For me, taking Jesus' words to heart are crucial when he said, "Do not be afraid of those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both the soul and body in hell."²

In Psalm 118:6, David wrote, "The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid. What can humans do to me? The Lord is with me; he is my helper. I will look in triumph on my enemies."³

In the Book of Hebrews, we hear "God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you. So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can humans do to me?"⁴

The next thing we could be afraid of is the future of what may or may not happen. This is certainly understandable when people have experienced significant trauma in their lives. They may even wonder when the next bad thing might happen to them or to those they love. The Bible encourages us to not go too far down that road, because we don't know the whole picture of what God is doing in our lives.

Jesus said, "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life?"⁵

Proverbs 3:5-6 says, "Trust in the Lord with all of your heart, and lean not on your own understanding, but in all of your ways acknowledge him and he will set your paths straight."⁶ This seems to imply that if we focus on what we are to do today, being faithful to God where we are at, then the future will take care of itself.

But then what about when it doesn't and people experience suffering of all kinds? Should that lead us to fear the future?

The Apostle Paul experienced trials of many kinds on his missionary journeys. He reported to the Corinthians...

"I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spend a night and a day in the

² Matthew 10:28

³ Psalm 118:6-7

⁴ Hebrews 13:5-6

⁵ Matthew 6:25-27

⁶ Proverbs 3:5-6

open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger of river, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city; in danger in the country; in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food. I have been cold and naked.”⁷

Paul said these things, not to simply boast that he had suffered more than anyone else. But to say that despite his suffering, God was using it for something greater that wasn’t apparent at the moment. If there were anyone who could have justified a fear of the future based on what he had experienced, it would have been Paul.

And yet Paul also said to the Corinthians, “We see but a poor reflection as in a mirror, then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.”⁸

God was working through all of these experiences to create in Paul Jesus’ character that would prepare him for the future.

I don’t know about you, but I am glad that God doesn’t reveal everything about our lives in advance. That would be too overwhelming. I would be far too consumed with what might be coming up, instead of just letting life unfold day by day. When we take life day by day, it is easier to trust the Lord with all of our heart and not lean on our own understandings.⁹

The next fear, I want to address is the fear of ourselves.

This past week during Vacation Bible School, we looked at the story in Matthew when Peter was invited to walk out on the water to Jesus. We are told that it was the fourth watch of the night and wind had picked up, causing the waves to crash against the boat. Peter did just fine until he took his eyes off Jesus and focused on the frightening weather.

And then Peter began to sink, crying out, “Lord save me.”

Immediately Jesus reached out his hand, caught him, and said “You of little faith. Why did you doubt?”

Peter was told to do something by Jesus that was beyond human reason...step out of the boat and walk out to him. This story was sandwiched between two other miracles of Jesus that were also beyond human reason...feeding five thousand with just five loaves of bread and two fish and feeding four thousand with just seven loaves of bread and a few fish.

⁷ 2 Corinthians 11:23-27

⁸ 1 Corinthians 13:12

⁹ Proverbs 3:5-6

But exactly what was going on in this story that caused Peter to doubt Jesus and begin to sink?

Remember that Peter was in a fishing boat. Peter was a fisherman. As a fisherman, his boat would have been a place that he knew well and was comfortable. Surely he had been in rough seas before, so the fact that the wind and the waves were beating against the boat shouldn't have unnerved him. It was when Jesus asked Peter to step outside of his comfort zone, in front of his peers, where Peter could no longer rely on that which he knew so well, his expertise, his seamanship, his meteorological knowledge to save him. Out on the water, he would have to rely solely on his trust in Jesus, and not his own strength and understanding.

Could he trust Jesus to not let him sink?

Peter knew these scriptures about trusting and not doubting. This would be the test of whether or not that knowledge had traveled from his head to his heart. Would he believe?

The end result was that Peter's faith was strengthened as he proclaimed, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Sometimes in life we need to make some pretty difficult decisions. Where we don't know which direction we should go. Do we move forward? Do we stay where we are? Do we backtrack? Sometimes it can seem that God is silent and his direction isn't so obvious. On top of that, God gives us no promise that everything will work out as we hoped.

What God promises is that he will be with us at each step along the way. The tricky thing is that we don't rush out too far in front of God but to faithfully listen for what to do and where we are to go next. And in that we can look back and see how God had been with us all along.

I don't know about you but sometimes in those moments of uncertainty, I can be my own worst enemy, like Moses and Peter, as I doubt if I have what it takes to do what God is asking of me. That's when it is crucial to have a trusted friend, spouse, spiritual director, pastor, or counselor who you can ask for wisdom as to what you should do next. Then we need to trust that the Holy Spirit will guide us in right paths.

We also need to be aware that our enemy, Satan, is also feeding us lies about ourselves that are telling us we aren't enough. We aren't good enough, smart enough, athletic enough, handsome enough, pretty enough, skinny enough... whatever...fill in the blank. Whenever we hear those internal voices, we need to rebuke them in the name of Jesus Christ and instead listen to what God thinks of us.

Another place in scripture where we hear "do not fear" is in the Psalms as David faced personal fears, vicious enemies, natural disasters, and death itself.

Psalm 34:4–5, “I sought the Lord, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears. Those who look to him are radiant, and their faces shall never be ashamed.”

Psalm 56:3–4, “When I am afraid, I put my trust in You. In God, whose word I praise—in God I trust. I will not be afraid. What can [another human] do to me?”

Psalm 46:1–3, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling.”

Psalm 23:4, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff they comfort me.”

I want to close today with addressing a particular fear that we don’t read about in the bible but we can be sure that if the bible were written today, it most certainly would top God’s radar list.

FOMO. The Fear of Missing Out.

In the 1800’s, postcards were developed to show off the places we had traveled to and what we had seen. In the 1960’s, it became slide shows. In the 1980’s, we had polaroids. Today, we have social media where we can follow livestream what everyone else is doing on their vacations with family and friends, and be constantly reminded that we are not part of it.

This fear is creating a mental health crisis among younger people today. “FOMO can lead to excessive wastes of our time on social media. Checking Instagram feeds can turn into hours upon hours spent looking at nothing of importance at all. It robs us of quality sleep and rest. It can lead to feeling more isolated, more lonely, and create more problems socially interacting with others.

FOMO impairs decision making skills, can lead to risky behaviors, and increase anxiety and depression. It can also promote misuse of alcohol and other illicit substances.

One article stated, “Platforms like Instagram and Snapchat shore up unmet social needs by allowing users to communicate in a way that avoids awkward face-to-face interaction. The ease of social media shuns the harder work of talking to people in person—unedited and unfiltered. Some may rely heavily on social media when seeking personal validation.”¹⁰

To our young people today heading off to college this summer, be careful that you don’t let social media rob you of connecting personally with new people at school. This first year is crucial that you meet as many people as you can. Cast your net widely as you can so that you find your “people.” Chances are the likely that the people you follow on social media are not your people.

¹⁰ Rashmi Parmar, MD, “Understanding the Fear of Missing Out,” posted on Psychiatric Times Website, October 6, 2022.

Set a daily limit for social media consumption.

Fast from time to time from social media.

Engage with friends in person.

Instead of waiting around for an invitation to other people's activities, create your own events and invite people to join you.

The more we engage in healthy habits around social media, the less FOMO will feed our insecurities and make us more depressed, anxious, and self-conscious.

I want to leave us with a few scriptures to feast upon in those moments when we feel afraid.

1 John 4:18 says, "Love casts out all fear. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out all fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love."¹¹

2 Timothy 1:7 says, "...for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control."¹²

John 14:27, Jesus tells us "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give as the world gives. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid."¹³

My friends, in what areas do we need to trust God more?

If God is for us, who or what can be against us?

Are there any new adventures that await us?

Are there any barriers in the way of us pursuing them?

How might our perspectives change if we truly believed that Jesus himself goes ahead of us and prepares a special place for us there?

Remember how Moses instructed Joshua before heading out for the Promised Land, "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified, for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you."¹⁴

So may we always remember who we are, and whose we are. May we not bow down to fear of any form of what the world might do to us. May we listen to Jesus' voice alone. And may we never forget that that He who lives in us is greater than the one who lives in the world.¹⁵

That is Good News!

Amen.

¹¹ 1 John 4:18

¹² 2 Timothy 1:7

¹³ John 14:27

¹⁴ Deuteronomy 31:6

¹⁵ 1 John 4:4