

“Do Not Be Afraid”

sermon, by Pastor Joy Smith, March 22, 2020
Exodus 14:5–14; Luke 4:1–13; Psalm 91

You have heard – Gov. Gretchen Whitmer declared a state of emergency after Michigan confirmed its first two cases of coronavirus disease. And since several dozen more cases in Michigan have been confirmed as the testing continues. The virus outbreak — is now a global pandemic — spreading across the United States including Michigan. All of us scrambling to react, taking measures to slow this thing down. the spread.

The governor ordered all K-12 schools closed, banned gatherings of over 50 and requested restaurants and bars to close and only use take out. Many businesses, government offices and social service centers also are shutting down. The Stock Market plummeted. Those who need work hours and childcare are desperate to figure out what to do. I heard on Tuesday, even the Mall of America in St. Paul, MN closed – If you were not afraid before, I expect you are now. Sorry about that. **Do not be afraid.**

(Here is what fear does to me) My lunch favorite is Subway. Today, I caught myself actually policing the number of people in line making sure there were only 5; making sure not just I but the rest of the customers were standing at least 6 feet away from each other.

Alma closed bars and restaurants, churches in our community have cancelled services and Social Services are doing drive by. So, what do we do?

Certainly, follow the state and federal requests and simple habits like washing our hands with soap and water. And don't travel unless you have too. Avoid all crowds.

It is too easy to decide all that we can do is to be afraid. We are in a strange place these days.

“You will not fear the terror of the night, or the arrow that flies by day,” the psalmist promised, “or the pestilence that stalks in darkness, or the destruction that wastes at noonday.”

The season of Lent leads us to Jerusalem where Jesus is arrested on trumped-up charges, tried in a kangaroo court in the middle of the night, and executed on a Friday afternoon on a hill near the garbage dump.

Lent allows us time, to ponder what all that means to our faith, and that God was in that drama, that innocent death, that suffering. Lent is the time to walk for a while with Jesus as he moves slowly, relentlessly to his destination on the cross.

One of the Lenten stories is Jesus in the wilderness, tempted by Satan. The Spirit leads him into the desert for forty days and nights.

It is a frightening place, lonely, dry, arid, windy; where a man could panic, break down, go mad. God leads Jesus into the desert and leaves him there alone, with his fears.

Centuries earlier, Moses led God's people out of their slavery in Egypt. They were stranded with the Red Sea on one side and the wilderness on the other: desert, danger, the unknown. 600 Egyptian chariots surrounded them.

"In great fear the Israelites cried out to the Lord." They say to Moses "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?" Of course, they are scared to death, terrified.

And Moses says, "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today." Easier said than done- right?

Fear is mentioned in the Bible at least 300 times. In fact, Walter Brueggemann says, you can summarize the whole Bible in two words: "**Fear not.**"

The Psalm I read has dramatic images of threat and danger—the terror of the night, the arrow, pestilence, and destruction—then promises there is nothing ultimately to fear: "Because you have made the Lord your refuge . . . no evil shall befall you."

Walter Brueggemann said in sermon: "Remember a time when, as a young child, you were frightened, lying in bed at night, sure that the shadows on the bedroom wall were of a burglar at the window, or a monster, and the bumps and creaks on the stairway surely a warning of something horrible about to happen. And you call out to your parents or caretakers from the darkness, in unrelenting fear, and they appear and take you in their arms: "It's OK. Everything is all right, I'm here. **Don't be afraid.**"

That, I believe is the fundamental, primary, and consistent message of the Bible: "I'm here. Don't be afraid." (Walter Brueggemann)

We all have fears, and they help navigate life.

Peter Steinke says, "Fear is a wake-up call. It arouses awareness of danger. It puts us on high alert. Yet he says: it can do just the opposite, overwhelming us and diminishing our alertness."

"When we are afraid, our body produces an abundance of adrenaline that floods our body, producing "intense vigilance – shocking our brains to focus on whatever it is that has frightened us. Then we are barely able to focus on anything else. Tunnel

vision occurs and fear takes over" ("Fear Factor," Christian Century, 20 February 2007).

Fear is a powerful motivator and a very real market force. Fear makes people raise the price on hand sanitizers, hand wipes; buy out all the TP and milk without considering others who need it too. Fear can make us mean and say and do things we might ordinarily. When we act out of fear and not out of our commitment to justice and kindness and compassion, a great tragedy has happened to us above and beyond the virus itself. Fear can shape us.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt reminded the nation – it did not have to live out of its fear. "The only thing we have to fear," he said, "is fear itself." Perhaps there is truth to that –

I'm thinking that personal fear is like prison. It oppresses and limits and confines us. Fear of failing convinces us not to venture something new and risky. Fear of humiliation prevents a bright student from raising her hand. Fear of ridicule keeps a passionate young man from speaking his mind.

Fear keeps us confined to one place, never risking, stretching, reaching. Someone said that if Michelangelo had been afraid of heights, he would have painted the Sistine Chapel floor. (pause)

Fear of rejection even prevents us from saying, "I love you. I need you. I want you." Peter Gomes says that "fear, not sin, is the curse on human life, and that when Jesus Christ frees you from your fear, your fear of death, you are literally given your life back."

Perhaps that is what we fear most. I recently read – Paul Tillich say that our real fear is the "anxiety of not existing anymore" Perhaps the "terror of the night" is not death, but it is our own death.

And then the promise of faith is – that there is nothing to fear.

"When they call me, I will answer them," the psalmist promises. "I will be with them in trouble." You don't have to be afraid.

Jan Richardson offers this wisdom about how to endure these troubling times. You can see what you think:

"To all that is chaotic in you, let there come silence.

Let there be a calming of the clamoring, a stilling of the voices that have laid their claim on you, that have made their home in you, that go with you even to the holy places but will not let you rest, will not let you hear your life with wholeness or feel the grace that fashioned you.

Let what distracts you cease.

Let what divides you cease.

Let there come an end to what diminishes and demeans, and let depart all that keeps you in its cage.

Let there be an opening into the quiet that lies beneath the chaos, where you find the peace, you did not think possible and see what shimmers within the storm." **Do not be afraid.** (pause)

Or, as another psalm so beautifully puts it, "Even in the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." **Do not be afraid.**

That is all I have to offer to you today in the midst of these strange and unexpected times. And that our faith in Jesus the Christ, the Great Spirit, an everlasting God presence, is summarized in the words "**Fear not.**"

Fear not the terror of the night.

Fear not the coronavirus.

Fear not terrorists.

Fear not the future.

Fear not the new job

Fear not the end of the old job

Fear not the end of the relationship

Fear not the risk of a new relationship

Fear not the move to a new place

Fear not the threat of failure

Fear not sickness

Fear not surgery

Fear not death itself.

The promise of God is that we will never be abandoned. Amen.

("Do Not Be Afraid" sermon, March 22, 2020, by Pastor Joy Smith)

(Thanks to Jan Richardson, John Buchanan, Walter Bruggeman, the Christian Century for help on this sermon.)