

Proper 7 (2020)

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Matthew 10:24-33

TLC, Keene, NH

Fearless!

"Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows."

O God, the Author of love and the Lover of pure peace and affection; let all who are terrified with fear, afflicted by poverty, harassed by tribulation, worn down by illness, be set free by Your indulgent tenderness, raised up [in] amendment of life and cherished by Your daily compassion; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. [The Gelasian Sacramentary]

Introduction

"My heart ... feels like it's going to explode."

[*Phobias*, American Psychiatric Association Publication, 1988, p. 1]

Such is the cry of someone given to great fear. Where, categorically, there are about as many types of fear as hairs on your head. Most common? Agoraphobia – the fear of open, crowded, public spaces – the fear of leaving a safe place. Then there is neophobia – the fear of anything new, or enosiophobia – the fear of having committed an unpardonable sin – or fear of criticism. My favorite? Bolshephobia – the fear of Bolsheviks! Which, with proper care, is quite treatable.

Where, to these, and all of our fears, Jesus descends. Not denying that real fear exists. Not chiding us for our failure to trust in His promises. But simply a Word, and a promise, to see us through those what we fear the most.

Therefore ...

Main Point: Let the redeemed of the Lord faithfully trust in Jesus' assurance and care, especially when facing tribulation, trial and trouble.

WE FEAR LESS, WHEN FEAR IS LESSENER BY OUR FEARLESS AND FAITHFUL SAVIOR.

Amen.

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In human terms, THE DISCIPLES HAVE EVERY REASON TO BE AFRAID.

Where, chapter 10 of Matthew opens with the Lord calling His own to places they've never gone [v. 6], to speak things they've never spoken [v. 7], and to do something they've never done. [v. 8]. Add to that, Jesus' own dismal warning:

"I am sending you out like sheep among wolves." [v. 16] Yes, "you will be betrayed, handed over, arrested, flogged, and even killed."

²⁴*"A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. ²⁵It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. [Where] **if they have called the master of the house Beelzebul [Satan incarnate], how much more will they malign those of his household.***

Well, OK then! Sign *me* up! "Rejection, intimidation, persecution, execution."
[Lehenbauer, *CPR*, 24:3, 20] I'm all in!

"But do not worry," Jesus says. *"Do not be afraid."* With a calmness and assurance that not only commands, but also makes possible ... and all because Jesus says it. "I am already sharing with you the same stigma you are presently suffering," He says. [Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew*, 34.1] "I have borne the worst of it, for you."

Still, FEAR COMES ... and OFTEN. Where no faithful Pastor would ever try to tell you otherwise. Yes, Pastor of the Lord's Church "would [ever] stand before his flock and glibly tell them: 'You have nothing to fear.'" [Lehenbauer, 21]

For me, it's altophobia, a fear of heights. Great for a past life in firefighting, right?

But I have others: like xenophobia – the fear of the unknown, of tussled up routines, of where the road may be leading me. I also fear disappointing people, or of hurting the ones I love. I fear, at times, that folks won't like me.

How about you? Perhaps it's nosophobia – the fear of getting ill, or here's one: or gerascophobia, the incessant fear of growing older or aging ... or here's one: phobophobia – the fear of fear itself.

Where, if we peruse the Scriptures, we're in great company. In fact, the word "fear" occurs 437 times in the English Standard Version; where, besides the disciples, there are many to whom the Lord said: *"Do not be afraid."*

Like **Abraham** at the prospect of failing to see God's promises fulfilled [Gen 15:1], Isaac [26:24], Rachel at the birth of Benjamin [35:7], or the **brothers of Joseph** when after what they had done to him, realized they were standing in his presence [50:19, 21]. There are the people of Israel at various times and seasons – almost always! [Ex 14:13; 20:20; Num 14:9; Deut 12:1, 31:6]. There was **Moses** in the face of his enemies [Num 21:34], **Joshua** in the face of his [8:1], **Gideon** in the Lord's call to take on the mighty menacing Midianites [Judg 6:23], and **Ruth** in the face of an uncertain future [3:11].

Even the goliath slayer **David** feared for his life at the hands of Saul [1 Sam 23:17], the widow of Zeraphath at the thought of her uncertain future [1 Kgs 17:3], as did **most of the kings of Israel** – in the face of their enemies [Is 7:4; 40:9 41:13f; 44:2; 54:4; Jer 30:10; 42:11; 46:27f; Joel 2:21f; Zeph 3:16; Zech 8:13, 15], Not to mention **Daniel** in the presence of the Son of Man [10:12, 19], **Joseph** at the news of Jesus' birth [Matt 1:20], **the shepherds** [Lk 2:10], and even **Mary** herself.

That's a whole lot of fear to go around. Some of whom paradoxically – by grace – are held up as examples of faith [Hebrews 11] ... good folk, faithful folk – but whose fears never overtook their “fear, love and trust” in God their Savior who said, “*Don't be.*” [v. 26, 28, 31]

Yes ...

WE MAY FEAR LESS, WHEN FEAR IS LESSENER BY OUR FEARLESS AND FAITHFUL SAVIOR.

HOW ... WHY?

FIRST, because God has given His sure and certain Word that we will be delivered.

²⁶“So HAVE NO FEAR* [the force being “don't even begin to be afraid”¹] *of them, for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. ²⁷What I tell you in the dark, say in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops.

It is the Lord of heaven and earth who calls the 12 to Himself, who no less calls us as well. [v. 1] It is He who gives us our marching orders – the very Word which enables us to follow Him, *wherever* He may be leading us. Yes, if the Word succeeds, it's His Word. If it falls among thorns, it's still His Word.

Therefore ...

Genesis 15:1 “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your very great reward.”

Deuteronomy 31:6 Do not fear [O Israel] ... for it is the Lord your God who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you.”

¹ *Sermon Studies on the Gospels*, A, 238; aorist subjunctive, “used in prohibitions to forbid a thing not yet done.”

Isaiah 44:8 **Fear not**, nor be afraid; have I not told you from of old and declared it? And you are my witnesses! Is there a God besides me? There is no Rock; I know not any."

Wherein, if the Lord's Word of promise is not assurance enough:

SECOND, He gives the added assurance – our soul's *ultimate* assurance – of a safe haven – that guarantee that far outlasts anything on this side of heaven.

²⁸And DO NOT FEAR those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.

Where, to be sure, there have been times in our lives where it appeared as if we would be overcome.

"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." (FDR, Inauguration, 3/4/33)

"Of course," says one commentator, "the fact is there would have been no reason for the thirty-second president of our country to assert his 'firm belief' that there was 'nothing to fear' unless there actually was something to fear. The country [after all] was in the throes of a staggering economic crisis, the Great Depression, sparking fears that were not 'nameless' or 'unjustified.' Later in his speech, Roosevelt himself admitted: 'Only a foolish optimist can deny the dark realities of the moment' – dark realities that gave substance to people's real and understandable fears." [Lehenbauer, 20]

Yet, for the baptized and redeemed of Jesus, we've lost nothing, if we lose the things of this earth. Even if we've lost our lives, we've lost nothing. For eternity in Christ looms larger than these.

Therefore ...

Isaiah 41:10 **Fear not** [our heavenly Father says to His own], *for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.*

Isaiah 43:1 *Thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.*

Leading us to ...

REASON # 3 [of why not to fear]: birds ... and your hair! (Not birds *in* your hair. Then you would have ornithophobia!)

²⁹***Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father.*** ³⁰***But even the hairs of your head are all numbered.***

"How deep the Father's love for us!" That He knows us so well, that He knows our failure to trust ... more intimately than we know them ourselves:

³¹***FEAR NOT*** [He says yet a third time], ***you are of more value than many sparrows.***

Where, Luther once had this to say about birds: that they are our "greatest preachers." These who teach us what true "fear, love and trust" of God are like.

Luke 12:32 ***"Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.***

Wherein, "certainly if God's providence extends itself over these *lesser* things in his creation, it will without question extend itself over the crown of his creation," the crown of our very heads! [*Sermon Studies on the Gospels*, A, 240]

Leading to ...

The FOURTH how or why not to fear: Jesus' own promise to acknowledge us.

³²***[That] everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven ...***

Revelation 2:10 ***Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. [But] Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.***

It's important to keep in mind, to whom Jesus is speaking here – a group who *all* fled from Him in His hour of need. Where, Jesus ultimately went to the cross to demonstrate that He would never do the same in our hour of need. Where, He has every right to deny us for the times we've denied Him in faith.

³³***But whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.***

Except ... for His patient suffering and great grace. Yes, it is not *insignificant* that Peter [and the others] will be restored – *after* He spoke *these* words. As are we ... raised up by the Good News of Jesus' seven Words of grace and forgiveness.

"[Where] the saying is trustworthy: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him; ... if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself." [2 Timothy 2:11-13]

WE truly may FEAR LESS, because FEAR IS LESSENER BY OUR FEARLESS AND FAITHFUL SAVIOR.

Conclusion

"The fear of loss is a path to the Dark Side ... *the shadow of greed this is.*" [So said Yoda to Anakin, who is troubled by a dream of Padme's death] It is this fear that eventually takes Anakin down a dark road.²

Where, F-E-A-R, someone once said, has one of two meanings:

Forget Everything And Run ... or ... Face Everything And Rise

Child of God, of what are you afraid? In the midst of what storm does fear seek to sink you? For ones called by the Savior, sent by the Savior, accompanied by the Savior, given to by the Savior, and acknowledged by the Savior, there is no doubt as to our outcome, or in whose Name. We most certainly rise in Jesus' name.

The promise that He once made to His disciples still stands:

John 16:33 *I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."*

WE FEAR LESS, WHEN FEAR IS LESSENER BY OUR FEARLESS AND FAITHFUL SAVIOR.

Amen.

² "Two threads can be discerned in the tapestry" of our text, says one commentator: trouble and trust. (1) Trouble, suffering, problems – these are to discipleship what water is to fish, discipleship's environment. **Trouble is the *habitat* of Christian work.** But then there is also (2) Trust, decision, commitment, standing up for ... abandonment of one's own life to Christ's cause – these are the inward realities of discipleship. **Trust is the *habit* of Christian work.**" (Bruner, *Matthew*, 1:379)

What do you fear? Of what are you afraid?

As I recall from my high school reading of George Orwell's *1984*, one of the ways that folks were brought into submission was to be confronted by their worst fear. In other words, if the state wanted you to become in lock step with everyone else, they subjected you to something you feared most. It's been a while since I read the book, but that image of the main character with a cage on his head and a rat staring him down still unnerves me. Which, just for the record, since this is being recorded, you're not getting anything else out of me.

In Sunday's Gospel reading, fear plays a prominent role. And who wouldn't be fearful to some degree, given all that the Lord said was going to happen to the disciples he had now commissioned to go out in His name? "Rejection, intimidation, persecution, execution." Sign *me* up! Where, we pick up Jesus' "marching orders" with v. 26: "*So have no fear of them, for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. What I tell you in the dark, say in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops. And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.*"

There is a lot in this world that might cause us to fear. I looked it up once and printed out no less than 13 pages of phobias, of which I am sure after the past few of months, we could add a few more to the list. Like aerophobia – the fear of drafts, air swallowing, or airborne noxious substances? Or agoraphobia – the fear of open spaces, or of being in crowded, public places. How about anthropophobia, the fear of people or society? Or autophobia, the fear of being alone. Here's one of my favorites, given all the "cocktail chatter" going on these days; allodoxaphobia – the fear of opinions.

Fear comes in all shapes and sizes. And whether we admit it or not, we've all got 'em. Yet, there is one thing we need never fear ... that any of our fears are bigger than the Gospel promise of God, a promise, says Jesus, that issues forth in the certainty of our standing with God in faith, as well as the outcome of that faith – heaven itself. And that in the space between the call issued forth in your Baptism, and the time when we will experience the unending joy of heaven itself, God sets about to care for His faithful ones. If I can borrow a line from Dave Matthews, it's there "*you'll find me hiding waiting for you.*"

Leaving us with a couple of everyday examples of how that is so: birds and your hair. V. 29: *Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore (there's that word again); you are of more value than many sparrows.*"

I know I'll probably rile a few of you up, but I once had a friend who had his degree in forestry who said, you shouldn't feed the birds; not because we are being cruel and heartless. I mean, who doesn't enjoy seeing birds in their window or splashing around in a bird bath? But when we feed them, my friend reasoned, we mess with their instincts, which I took to mean we mess with their trust in God for their provision – a provision God Himself has promised. Now, please go ahead in good conscience and keep feeding them! But Jesus' point, in the face of the things we fear most, is well made. In fact, Luther once called the birds, "God's greatest preachers on earth." Why? God isn't going to leave them hanging; and if them, how much more will He make provision for you and me? As Jesus says earlier in Matthew 6: *"Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life ... Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?"*

Therefore, "*Fear not!*" "Because God, who often hides himself behind the 'mask' of suffering," says one commentator, "will someday make all things clear ... Therefore, "*Fear not!*" "Because the God who watches over every minute operation of the universe ... will allow no harm to come to those who put their trust in him" ... Therefore, "*Fear not!*" Because in the end, Jesus – not the sin of this world, not Satan, not even death itself "will have the last word ..."

Wherein, as Christ's own, we have nothing to fear but "fear, love and trust in God above all things" ... and all "because Jesus has faced the source of every fear, has overcome every enemy that causes us fear, has promised to be with us and watch over in every fearful situation" until we make it safely home.

Which, by the way, is its own fear. No really! Ouranophobia, the fear of heaven, the afterlife, of meeting God. Which, some may well need to do, but not those – to quote Rich Mullins – who are given by faith to "dress like flowers and eat like birds" – like you child of God, like you.