

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

December 18, 2022

Do Not Be Afraid

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The phrase “do not be afraid” or some variation thereof occurs six times in the Gospel of Matthew.¹ Each time the phrase is uttered it is coming either from a messenger from God (usually an angel), or from Jesus, God’s only Son. It would almost appear as though God doesn’t want us to live in fear. Or, put another way, God did not create us to be fearful creatures.

This should come as no surprise when we consider what fear does in us. Fear impedes many of the abilities we rely on to keep awake, to be fully human. Now don’t get me wrong, fear has it’s uses. Fear can make us cautious. It can help keep us safe in new situations. The problem comes when too much of our lives are lived in fear.

What happens when we’re afraid? More often than not our “fight or flight” instincts kick in. When we’re startled or scared our first reaction is often to lash out or run away. Both are good options when survival is on the line. But those options are often not appropriate in other situations where fear is triggered by non-life-threatening situations. The “fight or flight” response makes sense when suddenly confronted by a stranger in a dark alley; it makes less sense when sitting at home watching the news.

So why do we live so much of our lives in fear? Well, unfortunately, triggering fear in us can be quite useful for those who seek power, control, and influence over us. Unfortunately, study after study has proven that strong emotional responses (anger, fear, outrage) drive engagement.² It’s no wonder then, that media companies who need engagement for advertising purposes will use tactics that are more likely to elicit those strong responses. Case in

¹ Matthew 1:20, 10:31, 14:27, 17:7, 28:5, 28:10

² Spence, H. E., & Moinpour, R. (1972). Fear Appeals in Marketing. A Social Perspective. *Journal of Marketing*, 36(3), 39–43. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1251038>; Wheatley, J. J. (1971). Marketing and the Use of Fear- or Anxiety-Arousing Appeals. *Journal of Marketing*, 35(2), 62–64. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1249919>

point with the news media: Isn't it odd that violent crime in America has fallen more-or-less continually since the early 1990s³ while coverage of violent crime in the media has risen to consume 38% of news broadcasts?⁴ We need to question why we are being fed a narrative that seems designed to keep us fearful.

The major problem with living too much of our lives in fear is that we are greatly limiting our ability to respond to situations in measured, thoughtful, and intentional ways. When we live in fear, we become reactive people as opposed to responsive and responsible human beings. We also tend to be less critical of power structures and systems when we're afraid. When we're living in fear, we want strong authority figures to make us feel safe; and we become too willing to sacrifice rights (especially the rights of others) to feel that security. Does any of this sound like the full, authentic, whole, and holy life God created us for? I don't think it does!

"Do not be afraid" the angel tells Joseph. Though we're given more specificity than that. The angel isn't worried that Joseph is afraid of it. Rather, the concern is that Joseph is afraid to take Mary as his wife. Why? Shame. If Joseph lived in fear, he would quietly set Mary aside and not go through with the promised marriage. All in order to avoid shame. Shame on him and shame on his family name and lineage. Going through with his betrothal to Mary would mean allowing his family, friends, and community to either believe that the two of them engaged in premarital sex or that he had been cheated on. Both very shameful prospects. "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife" the angel says. Do not be afraid of the shame is what the angel is really saying. This is the will of God that you are called to live out.

This must have been tough for Joseph. Imagine the looks he and a pregnant Mary must have gotten in the marketplace. The gossip when they returned from Egypt with the baby must have run wild. What snide remarks did he endure while raising Jesus? The fear of societal judgement and rejection is a major one, isn't it? That fear can certainly get in the way of connection and community. The fear of judgement and rejection governs more of our behavior than we often realize.

³ According to the FBI from 1993 to 2021 the rate of violent crime declined from 79.8 per 1000 victims to 16.5 per 1000 victims - <https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/cv21.pdf>

⁴ Valerie J. Callanan, *Media Consumption, Perceptions of Crime Risk and Fear of Crime: Examining Race/Ethnic Differences*, 55 SOC. PERSP. 93, 97-98 (2012)

But Joseph overcomes his fear. He lives out God's call to be husband to Mary and father to Jesus. He goes through with this difficult situation, knowing the shame he may endure. And he does it using the best antidote to fear, faith. Joseph trusts God's promise that this child will save his people. He accepts the message from God, the good news of the birth of a savior. He believes that Jesus is, indeed, God-with-us.

Resisting fear is a big part of the calling of Christians. Walking the Way of Christ means **not** living in fear. And it means **not having** to live in fear either! And why should we fear? We have this promise given here at the start of Matthew: God is with us! And we have the promise renewed again at the end of Matthew: "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."⁵ This is the great promise of the Incarnation: God is with us! Always! Wherever we might go!

Trusting in this promise is faith. Faith that we are blessed and beloved children of God who are no longer slaves to sin or death, and certainly no longer slaves to fear! Paul understood all this, teaching: "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God."⁶

"Do not be afraid" God says to Joseph. "Do not be afraid" God says to us! Do not live in fear! Know that God is with you, know that God loves you. Living out of that knowledge is the way to the kingdom of God. Living out of fear leads to nowhere but death. Living out of faith leads to nowhere but life. So stand up to fear! Look fear in the face and say I trust that God is with me in this moment. And then maybe, just maybe, we can thoughtfully, graciously, lovingly respond to the world around us rather than react to it. Amen.

⁵ Matthew 28:20b

⁶ Romans 8:15-16