

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church
“Fear Not”
By Eric Howell
Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18
February 28, 2010

Very often throughout the Bible, God, or God’s angelic messengers, say to human beings, “Fear not.” These words of assurance are most often offered when people first see or hear from God or God’s angels. So in that sense, “Do not be afraid” is just part of many individual encounters in scripture. It’s easy to miss how thoroughly the biblical story is grounded in this message. But when you go looking for it in the Bible, it’s everywhere.

In the first pages of the gospels, Zachariah, Joseph, Mary, the shepherds in the field, were each greeted by an angel with this message—do not be afraid. It was always the first thing they said, implying that the people were afraid. And no wonder if you look at the biblical descriptions of angels. They don’t look anything like those sweet ladies on *Touched by an Angel* or John Travolta with big white wings. They are scary looking creatures. Don’t be afraid they say, so that the person they are speaking to can settle down and hear what they have to say, reassured, at least for the moment, that they are not about to be destroyed by the creature that just appeared in the sky.

This message, “Fear not,” shows up in the Old Testament, too, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob among others. It’s as if the story of the people of God is the story of a people who have been given a gift of being set free from fear if they will just live in faith. It starts to jump off the pages like it might be the most important message God is trying to say to us.

It’s a message that maybe we need to hear first thing every morning. Because the message we get very often during the day is ‘be afraid. Be very afraid.’ The news of this weekend is serious and scary for the people of Chile and those who have loved ones in that area. It’s an event that should prompt the prayers and good will of Christians everywhere. I’m not sure, however, that it should have produced this actual headline in red ink, “Is nature out of control?”

Even on calm days, when there’s not much going on, the screen of cable news is full of running tickers on items of interest, twirling logos, Dow Jones updates. And then, almost always in big bold letters: Breaking News, Developing Story, The Latest. And the announcers are taught to speak with urgency in their voices, breaking news: bathwater can kill you, so can sidewalks, and terrorists are coming, but first these messages It’s exhausting and numbing. After a while, you stop noticing the effect it’s having on you, the anxiety level that it raises in you.

I have noticed when flipping through the radio stations in my car that when I move off of the sports talk station or news talk or even off of a DJ prattling on about something and classical music begins playing, I immediately breathe deeper. My body just relaxes into the music. This happens in prayer, too, in an even more profound manner. When we enter into the divine presence, our awareness of God’s faithfulness and peace re-opens our being to the greater Truth around us.

Do not fear, God says. This word is a good word for life. Do not be afraid. Notice God doesn't ever say to anyone, "You have nothing to fear" or "You have nothing to fear but fear itself." There may be plenty of reasons to have fear. Fear is an emotional defense response to something threatening that might happen in the future.

This is the message God gives to Abraham. Do not fear. I am your shield.

Abraham's fear came after he had won a victory in battle, not before. There's no record that Abraham was afraid before he went into battle or even before he stood before Melchizedek, the king of Sodom. It was something deeper. Abraham's fear came on him when he was alone with his private thoughts and his broken dreams and his anxieties. On the stage, he was brave, leaving behind his homeland to go to the place God told him, taking on enemies in war, negotiating a peaceful settlement with Lot, encountering a neighbor king. Alone, he was terrified. "As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, deep and terrifying darkness fell on him" (Genesis 15:12).

Perhaps the deepest, unsettling fear people have is that their lives won't have any meaning. It's not something that most of us think about most of the time, but eventually, almost everyone realizes on some level that all the material evidence of life is pretty insignificant—life is not about stuff, no matter how much stuff you have or don't have. And they wonder, deeply wonder, will my life matter? When we are young, the fear is that my life won't be the greatest thing the world has ever seen, that I won't change the world the way I'm sure I can if all these other people would stop holding me back. When we are older, we know quite for sure that the world won't remember us. We wonder if anyone will. Does my life matter? These are the kinds of questions that wander up in the dark evening and get inside our heads.

About Abram and about us, we might ask, which is the true man—the brave or the fearful? Is the brave a public face that masks the true trembling self of the man when he is alone? Or is the brave the true self that is revealed only when it is tested? Probably some of both, if he's anything like me . . . or you. He is both the person who does what he does in public and the one who, when left alone in the quietness of a lonely evening, worries and wonders about life and death, and worries about failure, and even worries about success. There's not a week that has gone by in over a decade of preaching that at some point I have not been scared of this moment—of the charge of speaking to and for the Holy One. And I'm pretty used to speaking in public by now. I feel for some of you who bravely step forward to say a prayer or lead the opening when I know you aren't used to looking out over this congregation and laying bare your soul. I commend your courage, and we all appreciate you more than you know.

In the liturgy Abram is instructed to perform, he cuts and carefully lays open the sacrificial animals of covenant before God. It feels like that's happening to you when you are afraid of something and yet you have to do it. It feels like you are cut open, with your inmost insecurities laid bare, vulnerable.

Like all fear, Abraham's fear was about the future. I don't have any children. My line will die out. Really, this was a fear about his life. In those days they didn't really have a concept of heaven and hell, of life after death that was revealed in later days and later scripture. In these days, eternal life, to the extent that they thought in those terms, was in the promise of your children and your children's children. You lived on through them, not exactly metaphysically, but not just metaphorically. Your sons were considered God's reward for your life. If God thought you worthy, you had children.

They and the lives that they lived were God's promise to you to continue on. Remember Job? When Job was described as a righteous man, he was described as having many children. When Job was being cursed, his children were taken from him. The stories of barren women later in the Old Testament illustrate the spiritual emptiness of Israel in certain generations.

So here Abraham is, in the twilight of the day and the twilight of his life, barren, without children, asking, not unlike many modern couples, "what have I done wrong?" This is the first time in scripture that Abram speaks back to God. So far God has talked to him, and he's talked to Sarai, to Lot, to Melchizedek, but for the first time he speaks to God. Sometimes, fear drives us right where we need to be. On our knees. "O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless and the one who will inherit my possessions is one of my servants. You've given me no offspring."

While today we certainly value our children as gifts from God and we recognize that for no apparent reason some couples who want to have children are able and some are not, we do not typically interpret these things as judgment from the Lord, though we certainly understand why barren couples wonder, "Why us?" and we grieve with those who are unable to have children and want them. But we don't interpret barrenness as damnation any more than we interpret the gift of children as our salvation. But they pretty much did.

God replies, "No, he won't be your heir. Your own son will." Wrapped up in that statement is not just the biology of you will have a child with your wife. It's not just the legality of who will stand to benefit when your will is read. It would have been understood as a statement from God about the merit of Abraham's life, about God's provision for him, and about his eternal reward, as it were. It means, your life has a purpose beyond itself, and I am going to use you for something much bigger than yourself or what you can control.

God says to Abraham. Do not fear, I am in control and you have a purpose.

And it provokes a crisis. Do you accept this promise? God's word always provokes a crisis of belief. And Abraham believed, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. He believed that he could trust God—a deep, active trust that God would fulfill God's promise.

On one side there's fear: an emotional response to a threat in the future.

On the other side there's faith: a sometimes emotional, sometimes rational—always beyond emotion and rationality—response to the promises of God for the future.

Over and over again in scripture people are afraid, from beginning to end, the narrative of the human drama is of a people who are a fearful people. From the very beginning when Adam and Eve, ashamed in their disobedience, heard the footsteps of the Lord and hid, "I heard the sound of you and I was afraid" (Genesis 3:10).

To the end of the Bible, where the author of Revelation describes the appearance of the son of man, "When I saw Him, I fell at His feet as though dead. But He laid His right hand on me saying, 'Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one'" (Revelation 1:17-18).

From Genesis to Revelation and everything in between, the front covers of our Bibles should read with its title and subtitle, “God’s Holy Word: You will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”

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