

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

Open-Handed Faith

Hebrews 11

August 10, 2025

“Do not be afraid.” We’ve heard those words already in our scripture readings this morning. It’s a good word that we need to hear again and again. I’m figuring there’s a good chance that even today, there may be someone here who may need to be reminded of this word. It’s a good thing, then, I suppose that this simple instruction, or is it invitation, runs through the whole Bible, from beginning to end. If the Bible had a marketing team, they’d put together an ad campaign about reading the Bible and then not being afraid. It’s like the subtitle of the sacred book. The Holy Bible: Do not fear. Do not fear, scripture teaches over and over, because God is faithful and trustworthy. God is sovereign and loving. You are in God’s hands. He’s got the whole world in his hands, you and me, brothers and sister. Do not fear. God’s got this. God’s got you.

That’s a main message of the scripture’s witness. The character and nature of God invite us into a way of faith, not fear. This affirmation is repeated again and again because of God’s faithful nature and because of our nature. Do not fear is not so easy. Fear. Anxiety. Worry. Constant companions. So Faith is at the intersection between God’s character and our disposition.

For people who have stress or fear, just saying, “Stop doing that,” isn’t always helpful. “My leg hurts.” Well, just stop hurting. It doesn’t really work that way. We’re not hopeless in this regard, but there can be a long distance between a life of faith in God that is rooted in assurance of things hoped for and conviction of things not seen and the anxieties that dominate our consciousness.

A cartoon in the New Yorker magazine captured the worry about worry. A man is sitting in his living room chair, a look of panic on his face. He’s dropped his book. His hair stands on end. He’s yanked his legs off the floor and onto the chair where he clutches them with his arms. The window next to him is shattered and a bundle of dynamite with a lit fuse that’s landed on the floor. He says to his wife in the doorway, “It’s my fault—I wasn’t worrying enough.”

In another cartoon, a man is sitting up in bed, talking on the phone. In the caption, he tells his friend, “When I can’t sleep, I find that it sometimes helps to get up and jot down my anxieties.” Around him, every square inch of the bedroom walls is covered with dozens of scribbled worries—war, recession, killer bees, aging, calories, balding and so on.

What’s on your list in the middle of the night as you confront, as Wendell Berry described, “despair for the world” or “fear of what my life and my children’s lives may be.” What’s on your list? Do not worry; do not fear? Ok, but now I’m worrying about my failure or

incapacity to stop worrying. This can't be what the Bible means, and it can't mean what God intends or desires for our lives. There has to be something else right?

John Shea describes the invitation, let's consider it an invitation to be received more than a command to follow... he describes the invitation as an alternative consciousness, he calls a gracious gift. This gift is previous to our mental or physical toil. The Source of Life nourishes it so that life can unfold from the inside out. "Consider the lilies," Jesus tells us, "consider the flowers, they neither toil nor spin yet God arrays them in splendor..." Shea observes, "considering life as an anxious project is not completely eliminated. Rather the anxious project is integrated into the gracious gift, and the gracious gift transforms it." He pictures then a flower, releasing and opening up to be open to what is around and above.

A picture of that transformation is right there in your hands when they are clinched like fists. Sometimes I find myself awake in the middle of the night—I can't be the only one, right? I don't want to be awake, but there we are. Then the thoughts fire up. Here they come like a dystopian parade. The circus of worry has come to town, right down main street. A parade of concerns from the utterly mundane—will the Aggies QB learn how to hit a wide receiver this year?—to concerns about family—about that health issue or the harsh word I said, or the AC air filter I haven't yet replaced. Or the article I haven't yet written. Or the global—what about the rising sea levels or the plight of refugees or the future of representative democracy. I don't want to be thinking of any of this at 3 am, but there I am. You've been there, right?

I'm not saying there's an easy solution to worries and fears that push their way in the middle of the night or the days. But we're not hopeless right. We are assured, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." This has to mean something.

The English mystic Julian of Norwich gave her conviction, "All shall be well. All manner of thing shall be well." When she did, she was looking terrible realities in the face with faith—this woman lived through the Black Plague, which took the lives of 70 million Europeans and devastated her hometown. She knew hardships and troubles. She knew pain and concern and loss. Still, her faith in God was even deeper than her deepest worries. Ours can be, too. It didn't mean that there's no problems, but she had a conviction that the world cannot be twisted in a way that God cannot straighten it out. *All shall be well.*

Hebrews 11 remembers the stories of men and women whose faith sustained them through their own hard times and uncertainties---when it seemed there was no future or hope. Their faith is assurance of things hoped for, a conviction of things yet not seen. Their faith is in a God through whom the worlds were made seen from things not seen.

The people celebrated a faith manifested into material reality what would not have been seen. Abel brought a sacrifice of his garden to a God who was beyond him. Abraham and Sarah had faith they could have a child, even though they were old, so old, according to

Hebrews, they were “as good as dead,” which is rude. Noah built an ark before any rains fell. Over and over, the shape of faith is the same shape of creation and of resurrection. Something good is coming that you can’t see yet. Something more than you can see now. This is faith--- assurance of things hoped for, a conviction of things yet not seen. The invitation is to open your hands, open your heart, open your life to receive openly and give generously, and as you do, you become a vessel through which the grace of God is made known, shared, received, and experienced.

We have our role to play. We have our work to do. But in the end, it’s simply not ours. It’s God’s. I take solace in this when I despair. I don’t want the world to be twisted around—I want justice and kindness and goodness. I want what’s good for the world, and for our nation, and our people, and our communities, and our families. I want and am willing to do whatever I can for the good. But in the end, I’m brought up short. In the end, it’s all beyond me—and it’s beyond you. The faith that nothing can’t be twisted in a way that God can’t straighten it out invites us to take extremely seriously the problems, while believing that God’s grace and love and faithfulness are greater than our greatest problems. This is a working definition of faith.

There are those other sayings in scripture come to mind. Like from Philippians 4:7: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." Or 1 Peter 5:7: "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you."

This is what Jesus means by “it is your father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom”. The kingdom is a way of describing the world God is bringing about in and through you as you take part in God’s way, truth, and life, and live in faith.

“Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” We are given the kingdom. And the very next line, we give it away. We receive only as a conduit-- always a conduit. The goodness of God flows through you to others. So we see with Jesus’ saying, “Do not be afraid, for it is your father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” And the very next line, “Sell your possessions and give alms.” These two sayings go hand in hand. Receive lavishly. Give generously. The kingdom is the giving and receiving of life.

There’s a receiving and a giving. We are not to be a cul-de-sac into which God’s good gifts are given and then amassed or hoarded. That’s the way of fear. When the Bible says do not fear, this is what it means—don’t be a cul-de-sac.

This is not the way of the kingdom. It’s like holding air or water in your hand. You can’t do it. It’s always passing through you. From the source through you to the neighbor. Air. Water. Love. The kingdom works the same way. You don’t receive the kingdom as a bank vault or like the Dead Sea. The Dead Sea receives water from the Jordan river, but there’s no outlet for the water other than evaporation. The body of water then is, as the ancient name

implies, dead—no life, no fish, no communities built on its shore. The dead sea is a parable of life when we receive and do not give. When we grasp and cannot release the hand.

The sign of faith is the open hand.

Thinking of hands. Going back to that experience of anxiety in the middle of the night. I've discovered that when my mind is running in circles chasing its tail of worry, my hands clench, manifesting themselves the spiritual, emotional, mental state. That which is unseen is made visible—in my hands. I can't be the only one, right?

And so I've learned the prayer practice that helps me is the physiological act of slowly opening my hand, and feeling it come open, like the flower Jesus spoke of. The hand is connected to the head and the heart. Opening the hand allows the blood to flow, the heart rate to slow, the mind to calm. And even more, it is a sign of rest and trust in God. If nothing else, it helps you go back to sleep. Sometimes. I'm no sleep expert; I'm just saying that if your hand is clenched by day or by night, that's probably telling you something.

We are invited: do not fear.

Invited in the middle of the dark night...

Invited at the threshold of the change...

Invited at the uncertainty of our security...

Invited at the disruption and dissolution of things held dear...

We are invited with the same precious words of God to everyone in need: "Do not fear. You're mine."

Amen.

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