

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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TO FEAR OR NOT TO FEAR

Luke 2:8-14

There is something about angels that always seems to evoke a response of fear when they appear to mortals like you and me. In the Bible, people to whom angels appear are often struck with terror in their hearts. And very often, the first words out of an angel's mouth are "Fear not" or "Do not be afraid."

This is the case in the portion of the Christmas story we just read from Luke 2, where an angel-messenger sent from God appears to a group of shepherds caring for their flocks in the fields outside Bethlehem. Here is how Luke describes it:

"An angel of the Lord appeared to (the shepherds), and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them: 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.'"

The first response of the shepherds to the appearance of the angel was fear. Terror struck their hearts. They were frozen with fear.

This reaction is not unusual. In Luke 1, the angel Gabriel appears to a childless priest named Zechariah, who was to become, by God's design, the father of John the Baptist. While in Jerusalem to carry out his priestly duties, Zechariah was chosen to enter the Holy Place in the Temple to offer incense to the Lord on behalf of the people. Suddenly and without warning, Zechariah found himself face to face with an angel. How did he respond? Luke 1:12 says: "... (H)e was startled and gripped with fear."

The angel's first words to him were: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayer has been heard" (1:13). The angel then proceeded to tell Zechariah that he and his wife Elizabeth were to have a son who would be God's instrument to prepare the people of Israel for the coming of the promised Messiah (1:13-17). Zechariah, sad to say, did not believe Gabriel's message. Because both he and Elizabeth were well advanced in years, it seemed impossible to him. Yet, despite Zechariah's unbelief, God did what He said He would do. Within a year, Elizabeth gave birth to a son to whom they gave the name John.

Before John was born, when Elizabeth was in the sixth month of her pregnancy, God sent Gabriel to the town of Nazareth in Galilee to deliver a message to a young woman named Mary, a virgin engaged to be married to a carpenter named Joseph. When Gabriel appeared to her, she was troubled by the way the angel greeted her. She must have been afraid, because Gabriel said to her: "Do not be afraid, Mary. You have found favor with God" (Luke 1:30). Once again, as with both Zechariah and the shepherds, the appearance of an angel evoked the response of fear.

Matthew 1 tells of yet another angel visit, this time in a dream to Joseph, Mary's husband-to-be. In this case, it was not the appearance of the angel but the circumstances of Mary's pregnancy that gave rise to fear in the heart of Joseph. Being a godly man, Joseph did not want to expose Mary to public disgrace. So he had determined to take care of things quietly. But the angel said to him: "Joseph, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because her pregnancy is totally a God-thing. It is the Holy Spirit who has made her pregnant. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give Him the name Jesus" – which means *The Lord Saves* – because He will save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:20-21).

The Greek word for fear is *phobos*, from which we get the word "phobia." Both *phobos* and the verb *phobeomai*, which means "to fear" or "to be afraid," are frequently used in the Bible.

Do you know where you can find the first reference to fear in the Bible? The answer is Genesis 3:10. After eating the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve try to hide from God, which is the instinctive human response when we know we have sinned. But we can no more hide our sins and ourselves from God than Adam and Eve could. As if He doesn't already know, the Lord says to Adam: "Where are you?"

Adam answers: "I heard You in the garden, and *I was afraid* because I was naked. So I hid" (Genesis 3:8-10, emphasis added). Afraid of what? Afraid of God's anger. Afraid of God's displeasure. Afraid of being punished. Afraid of being found out. Afraid of having his sin exposed. Afraid of the consequences.

That is the first mention of fear in the Bible. Not surprisingly, "fear" is a common theme throughout the Bible. Sometimes it is a good thing, sometimes not. On one occasion, Saul, the first king of Israel, disobeyed the explicit instructions God had given him through Samuel. When confronted with his disobedience, he confessed that the reason he did it was because "I was afraid of the people" (1 Samuel 15:24). Saul is a classic example of a weak leader who is more concerned with his approval ratings than he is with following God.

In Daniel 5, we read of another leader, Persian King Belshazzar, who, while hosting a great banquet in his palace, saw the handwriting on the wall. Literally. This is where the phrase "the handwriting on the wall" comes from. As the wine is flowing freely, Belshazzar and his guests make the fatal mistake of giving praise to "gods" made of gold and silver, bronze and iron, wood and stone" (5:4). They worship created things rather than the Creator Himself. But God intervenes in a dramatic way to get the attention of the king and all his guests, as the fingers of a human hand mysteriously appear and begin writing on the wall. As Belshazzar watched this take place, "his face turned white and he was so frightened that his knees knocked together and his legs gave way" (5:5-6). He was scared out of his wits. With good reason.

Turning to the Gospels, we know the disciples of Jesus were overcome with fear more than once as they battled storms on the Sea of Galilee. On more than one occasion, Jesus said to His disciples: "Don't be afraid." For example, when the disciples were in their boat out on the lake one night, and Jesus came to them walking on the water, they were terrified. You can

understand their reaction. They weren't used to seeing someone actually walking on water. But it was Jesus, and He said to them: "Don't be afraid. It is I."

Then Peter, the impulsive one, said: "Lord, if it is really you, tell me to come to you on the water."

To which Jesus replied: "Come."

So Peter got out of the boat, and *he* started walking on the water toward Jesus. As long as he kept his eyes on Jesus, Peter was fine. But when he started to think about the wind howling and the waves churning, he was overcome with fear and began to sink. In desperation, he cried: "Lord, save me!" And what did Jesus do? He reached out to Peter, grabbed his hand, pulled him up, and the two of them climbed into the boat.

Another example: On the mount of transfiguration, when Jesus met with Moses and Elijah, three of the disciples – Peter, James, and John – were given a sneak peek, a momentary glimpse of the true glory of the Son of God. With their own ears they heard the voice of God speaking to them. What did they do? They fell flat on their faces. Just as you and I would. They were terrified. What did Jesus do? He put His hand on each of them, and said: "Don't be afraid" (Matthew 17:1-8).

Jesus consistently told His followers not to be afraid. A lot of people today are anxious to the point of being obsessed with what the future may hold, and how the "end times" will play out. There is nothing new in that. Jesus spoke to His disciples about it shortly before His crucifixion: "When you hear of wars and rumors of wars" which seem to happen all the time, "don't be alarmed" (Matthew 24:6; Mark 13:7). "Do not be frightened," says Jesus (Luke 21:9). Don't let your fears overwhelm you. Don't let fear defeat your faith.

As the angel said to the shepherds, as Gabriel said to Zechariah and to Mary, as an unidentified angel said to Joseph, as Jesus repeatedly said to His disciples: "Fear not! Trust in the Lord with all your heart. Take God at His Word." Keep in mind what Gabriel said to Mary when he told her of God's plan for her life: "Nothing is impossible with God" (Luke 1:37). What is totally impossible from a human point of view is HIM-possible with God.

Yes, fear is a universal human phenomenon. Everybody is afraid of something. According to humorist Dave Barry, "All of us are born with a set of instinctive fears – of falling, of the dark, of lobsters, of falling on lobsters in the dark, of speaking before a Rotary Club, and of the words 'Some Assembly Required.'"

There is a web site – www.phobialist.com – that identifies and lists more than 500 different phobias. Among them is *homilophobia*. Do you know what *homilophobia* is? It is the fear of sermons. Another is *peladophobia*. Do you know what it is? It is the fear of bald people. Put them together, and you've got a deadly combination.

The fear of public speaking seems to be at or near the top of most lists of the most common phobias. The fear of heights is up there, too, along with the fear of flying. Fear of the dark,

the fear of failure, the fear of rejection, and the fear of being abandoned are common phobias as well. One of the newest phobias, if one can call it that, is “the fear of missing out,” or FOMO for short. It is a new form of social anxiety that has taken off with the rise of social media, which enable one to keep up to the second with friends and other contacts. FOMO is an “infectious disease” caused by continually “following” friends and others on facebook or twitter or Instagram or whatever the latest new thing is, and constantly comparing your life, activities, experiences, and status with how others portray their lives. FOMO is a trap that can easily trip you up.

In addition to the fear of *missing out*, I think many people secretly struggle with the fear of being *found out*. By which I mean, the fear of being publicly embarrassed, the fear of having some indiscretion or act of foolishness, past or present, exposed to the world. It may be some secret sin that you confessed to the Lord and repented of long ago. And yet Satan continues to hound you about it. He reminds you of it relentlessly. He tries to use it as a wedge between you and God in order to rob you of the peace and joy of the Lord in your life.

Listen to me: We *all* have secret sins that only the Lord knows, and maybe the people who are closest to us. Maybe. We *all* have stuff in our pasts that we don’t want anyone to know about. We are *all* unworthy sinners who have done nothing to merit God’s favor and everything to deserve His righteous and holy wrath. None of us is good enough, or even close to good enough, to deserve the kindness and love of God. But we have a Savior who has taken the initiative to save us Himself. He has done for us what we could not and cannot do for ourselves. He has taken all of our sin and guilt – all of *my* sin and guilt, and all of *your* sin and guilt – upon Himself, and He has taken care of it in His death for us on the cross. Which means that *everyone* who turns to Him in faith, *everyone* who receives Him, *everyone* who believes in His name has been forgiven and set free from our slavery to sin and guilt and fear.

If you trust in Jesus Christ – the true Son of God and Savior of sinners, God incarnate, God *with* us in flesh and blood, God *for* us – and His saving work on the cross for you, you need not ever fear God. At least not in the sense of being terrified of Him. There is a kind of fear of God that the Bible commends to us, which is what I want to talk about with you next Sunday.

For today, a good way to end is with this message from the Lord Himself to His covenant people through Isaiah the prophet:

Do not fear, for I am with you;
do not be dismayed, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you and help you;
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.
... I am the LORD, your God,
who takes hold of your right hand
and says to you:
Do not fear; I will help you.
(Isaiah 41:10, 13)

This is what the LORD says:
Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have summoned you (to myself) by name;
you are mine.
When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you.
And when you pass through the rivers,
they will not sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire,
you will not be burned;
the flames will not set you ablaze.
For I am the LORD, your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.
(Isaiah 43:1-3)

Let this truth penetrate the innermost recesses of your heart. Let it set you free – free from all anxiety and worry and doubt and fear, free from the power of sin and guilt – to live for God and His glory. Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.