

Facing Our Fears with Faith
Matthew 10: 27-31

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“Americans will never taste security and safety unless we feel security and safety in our land,” said Osama bin Laden a few weeks ago in a video shown around the world. It is the purpose of terrorists to terrorize and it appears these criminals have succeeded in making Americans more fearful than ever before. Never again will we board a plane, open a letter, or enter a stadium with the kind of innocence we assumed before September 11th.

How will we learn to live with this kind of fear? To fear or not to fear. That is not the question. Only fools feel no fear. The question is: How can we use our present fears as a force for good? Fear can poison our lives with anxiety or begin a new wave of wisdom. I challenge you today, as Jesus challenged His disciples facing a cruel world so long ago, to face your fears with faith. Here are some ways faith can help us.

Faith can help us SHARE our fears.

V. 26-27 So, have no fear of them for nothing is covered that will not be uncovered and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell it in the light and whatever you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops.

There is an invocation in the old Order of Sunday Service that states: *Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love thee, and worthily magnify thy name, through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

God goes for full disclosure. The light is shining in the darkness. Christian faith teaches that sooner or later all things will come to light. Here, Jesus is preparing His disciples to go into a terror-filled world. In essence He is saying, “You would do well to share your fears.”

One method of conquering fear is to give your fears a name. Before September 11th, when asked to name their fears, Americans responded this way: 51% of us are afraid of snakes, 40% of us are afraid of public speaking, 36% of us are afraid of heights, 34% of us are afraid of being closed in a small space, 21% of us are afraid of needles and shots, 18% of us are afraid of flying in an airplane. I expect that number is much higher now. Except for those suffering from some phobia, I suspect our real fears are much deeper than that survey.

We will be wise today to bring our fears to the surface, so we can face them with faith. Some of our fears are Simple Fright. Fear is an alarm system. It is like our

home security system. It sounds at the appropriate time for our good and value. Fear was designed by God to give our bodies the sudden burst of strength and speed we need in an emergency. Fear is a natural, normal reaction to danger. A mother was tucking her small son to bed during a thunderstorm. She was about to turn off the lights and leave the room when the toddler looked up to her and said, "Mommy, will you sleep with me tonight?" The comforting mother gave her little guy another hug and said, "I can't dear. You know Mommy has to sleep with Daddy." After a long silence, the child said in a shaky voice, "Yes, Daddy really is a sissy, isn't he?"

We all have our fears. We can forgive our children for being afraid of the dark. The real tragedy of life is that we are afraid of the light, even more than the dark. Some of our fears are Simple Fright.

Some of our fears stem from Secrets from the Past. They come to haunt us day after day. In his book, *Telling Secrets*, Fred Buechner says, "Our secrets may not be hid from God, but we do a good job of hiding them from other people and ourselves." He goes on to tell this bit of autobiography:

Most of my life, I was not likely to admit the fact that my father drank himself into a self I could hardly recognize as my father every time he went to a party. My mother, when he came home, would always go into a rage and say such wild and scathing things to him that it made the very earth shake beneath my feet when I heard them. The pain of unspoken secrets, even to myself, haunted me through my days. Those who wish to come out of the dark, may have to take their hands off their own eyes in order to see. Some of our fears are Secrets from the Past. Bring them to the light.

Some of our fears are Struggles with Inferiority. I preached my first sermon at the age of fifteen. It lasted five minutes, during which time I said everything I could possibly think to ever say, twice. Then, I sat down and cried like a baby. I was scared to death. Do you know something else? Every Sunday morning when I climb the steps to this pulpit, I'm still scared to death. I am not afraid of you and I am not really afraid of failing. I fear disappointing God, of making Good News, simply boring news, of turning salvation into sentimentality, and somehow making spiritual transformation some trivial pursuit of churchology. Sometimes our inadequacies leave us afraid.

Sometimes we are Suspicious about the Future. It is a wild and weary world, at times. In my profession, I stand beside a lot of nervous grooms. In that moment before we walk down the aisle, almost without exception, they are afraid. You know what? They ought to be. Thanks to my job, I get to visit a tremendous number of parents who are just saying, "Hello," to a new-born baby. It is a wonderful, wonderful privilege and opportunity to walk into a hospital room and, now days, get to hold a baby. In some ways, I get to be "grandpa" to a whole congregation. I take the baby in my arms and soon I look in the eyes of the parents. In the midst of all the joy and excitement, there is also a tinge of anxiety. "My, what on earth have we gotten ourselves into?" New parents are nervous and

afraid. You know what? They ought to be. It is tough being parents.

Dennis the Menace, bursting through the door with a black eye and a head swirling from a fist-fight he has been in on the playground, said, "I think my guardian angel took the day off." In reality, our guardian angel does have ways of taking days off now and then. It is a risky, frightening, shaky world in which we live. No one is completely and totally safe. We will take a step forward in handling our fears when we learn to give our fears a name and share them with the people around us. We handle our fears through faith, "by bringing that which is dark into the light," said Jesus.

There is something else in this text.

Faith helps us SORT our fears.

V. 28 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.

You see, fear is a two-edged sword. On the one hand, fear paralyzes us and on the other hand fear can empower us. On the one hand fear can kill the soul; it can just take the spirit out of you. On the other hand, fear can thrill the soul.

There is something about humanity that likes to live on the edge. Fear can create a kind of energy and excitement. How boring life would be if nothing ever scared us or got our attention in any way. We like living on the edge. How else can you explain our fascination with reality television? The worst example has to be NBC's "Fear Factor". People are stupid enough to jump over tractor-trailers going down an interstate highway at forty miles an hour or crazy enough to be dropped in a pit of rats, or parachute off a mountain, or swim with sharks, all for fifty thousand dollars and the thrill of it all. What is it about humanity that loves to live on that daring edge of life that is just one step beyond absolute and total fright? Isn't it interesting? There is something about fear that energizes. In a well-defined, computer-controlled world, there remains this child-like hunger of living wonderfully dangerous. I think it is inherent in us. I learn most of my lessons from my children and, now, my grandchild. Last month, I took my two year old grandson to the zoo. He was so excited about going that he talked without ceasing, but he was so scared that he needed constant reassurance from his granddaddy that every lion, tiger and bear would not come and eat him alive. What is there about human nature that wants us right on the edge? If trivial fears can excite us, then I ask you, why not use the treacherous days to make this world a better place?

Is this not the lesson of history? Fearing darkness, we discovered electricity. Fearing pain, we made gigantic advances in medicine. Fearing ignorance, we have created modern education. Today, I ask you, would we dare take the fear of terrorism and let it inspire us to world community? There may have been a time when you were not interested in Afghanistan, in Middle Eastern Europe, or the other parts of the world, but you do not have that privilege anymore. You had better be interested!

Is it possible to take this moment and use the energy that fear has created to develop a world that is really safe for all of humanity? Education consists of being afraid at the right time, in the right way, for the right purpose, or as I like to say, “Never let a fear go to waste.” Use what frightens your body to energize your soul.

Psalm 111:10 says, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. All who follow His precepts have good understanding.” I have never preached a sermon from that text. I can tell you why. I got such a dose of it in childhood— “the fear of the Lord”— where an effective evangelist dangles you over the flames of hell so much that you could feel them lapping at your feet and create guilt in good people to the kind of degrees that you were sure you were destined to hell. So, most of us coming through those kinds of experiences have found a better day in our religious faith. We have abandoned that kind of “fear of the Lord” and rightfully so. But, what kind of God have we gotten instead? A personal shopper? An errand boy? A Santa Claus? A convenient buddy? An imaginary friend? Somebody to pull off the shelf when we need a little extra help, otherwise, leave us alone? The one who leaves us cozy, but never converts us? What has happened to us in the Christian faith when we have “tamed” God so much that we have made God impotent?

I seem to read about a different kind of God in the Bible. A God who is both loving and absolutely wild. The Biblical God is a bone-chilling, earth-shattering, gut-wrenching, knee-knocking, heart-stopping, life-altering Lord, at whose coming somebody needs to announce, “Fear Not!” otherwise, you are shaken right out of your shoes by the terror of His power and presence and, indeed, His love, which gets to us in the most frightening sorts of ways. That is the God of the Bible. I suggest it is time to rediscover that God. If the right “fear of the Lord” takes possession of the heart, then we are caught both in amazement and awe. Sometimes we sing it:

Our God is an awesome God.

He reigns from Heaven above,

With wisdom, power and love.

Our God is an awesome God.

Have you rediscovered the awesome nature of your Lord?

Faith helps us SORT our fears.

Faith will help us SURRENDER our Fears.

V. 29 “Are there not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet, not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. Even the hairs on your head are counted, so do not be afraid. You are of so much more value than many sparrows.”

People who first heard that immediately understood. Sparrows were sold in bundles of ten so the poor people could have an appropriate sacrifice to offer. Sparrows were less than a dime a dozen. And yet, says Jesus, not even one of them falls to the ground, worth less than a penny, without the Almighty taking

attention.

How do we handle our fears? We surrender them to the Lord. Robert Morris, in an article in the journal, *Weavings*, says, “Here I was in bed when lightning struck my house. Suddenly, it caught on fire and I found myself standing in the yard, barely dressed, in the drenching rain, watching firemen race through the attic as flames broke through the roof. In my soul there was a war between panic and peace. On the one hand, I was wringing my hands saying, ‘My God, we’re about to lose everything we have ever accumulated or accomplished in our lives.’ On the other hand, there was assurance swirling in my soul, saying, ‘if we lose all that we have, then we shall be as we are now, in the hands of a loving God.’ Standing there, soaked to the skin, I felt naked and vulnerable in the dark, yet, calm and reassured that I was not alone.” Is not the experience of Robert Morris, the opportunity for all of our experiences?

In his book, *Mastery*, E. Stanley Jones observes that early Christians were absolutely fearless in the face of terror. They turned threats into testimonies, they turned beatings into blessings, they turned lies into light. How did they do it? They did it because they were totally surrendered to God and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

I say to you today, let us face our fears with faith:

“Surely, it is God who saves us. Let us trust in Him and not be afraid.”

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for God is with me.”

“The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?”

“Fear not, for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people.”

“There is no fear in love because perfect love casts out fear.”

“God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death, nor mourning, or crying or pain, for the former things have passed away.” Fear not, for God is there.

We sing because we’re happy

We sing because we’re free

His eye is on the sparrow

And I know he watches me.

Amen.

