

## “Fear Not”

Isaiah 12:2-6, Zephaniah 3:14-20 & Luke 3:10-16

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What do you fear? Beyond the fears that we are able to name we also struggle with subconscious fear and fears that we deny. If you are anxious, lethargic, frustrated, or have difficulty sleeping then you are likely wrestling with fear. We live in a world where fear sells, fear improves ratings, fear divides and some leaders make decisions based on fear and try to manipulate others by spreading fear.

Since the first person experienced their first fear, God has been actively working to eradicate fear. The prophet Isaiah proclaims, **Isaiah 12:2-6 NLT “See, God has come to save me. I will trust in God and not be afraid. The Lord God is my strength and my song; God has given me victory.” With joy you will drink deeply from the fountain of salvation! In that wonderful day you will sing: “Thank the Lord! Praise God’s name! Tell the nations what God has done. Let them know how mighty God is! Sing to the Lord, for God has done wonderful things. Make known God’s praise around the world. Let all the people of Jerusalem shout God’s praise with joy! For great is the Holy One of Israel who lives among you.”**

The prophet Zephaniah proclaims, **Zephaniah 3:14-20 NRSV “Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The LORD has taken away the judgments against you, God has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more. On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. The LORD, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; God will rejoice over you with gladness, God will renew you in God’s love; God will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival. I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the LORD.”**

Leonard Sweet tells a story about a certain Native American tribe who had a unique way of training young braves. “On the night of a boy’s 13th birthday, he was led out into the wilderness to spend the night alone. Most young braves, at this time in their lives, had never been away from the security of their elders. Yet on this night, these young teenagers were blindfolded and taken miles away. When each one took off his blindfold, he found himself in the middle of the woods. Alone. Dependent on nothing but the good will of the Great Spirit, and his own survival training. We can well imagine what a terrifying night that was for these young boys. Imagination magnified every woodland sound, until it seemed like a fearsome monster. But then, finally, each young brave managed to get to sleep. When dawn broke, he rubbed the sleep from his eyes and looked around. What he saw was an amazing sight — a tall man, standing just a few feet away, armed with bow and arrow. It was his father. He had been there all night long, weapons at the ready: watching over his son, as he slept. Into each human life, some fears intrude. There are indeed times when thick darkness surrounds us, and we may justifiably wonder if we will ever see daylight again. Yet even in times of loneliness and despair — especially in times of loneliness and despair — we are not alone. There is one who waits beside us, to watch over us and protect us.”

John Holbert believes Zephaniah’s message helps each of us overcome our fears and urges us to watch over others. John writes, “Zephaniah lived in a day of constant terrorism, and fear must have ruled the land. Yet, he ended his words to Israel with a pure song of joy. Why? Was he simply naïve, blinded to the real threats from the east by a Pollyanna-like conviction that God would save the day, because God loved Israel too much to let them be swallowed up? If you imagine that, you have not read his words with care. And if we allow our fears of terrorism to rule our lives, we reveal in that action that we have no trust in the God of righteousness, the God

who does indeed love us, the God who reveals Godself in the midst of terror by acting with deeds of righteousness. ...This Advent is a sort of test for us, I think, a test concerning whether we are followers of the righteousness of God or followers of the fearmongers among us, who would have us arm ourselves with guns, build walls against all those we deem unworthy of our country, and remain satisfied with what we have accumulated, locking it away from all who ask only for a chance to live in freedom. If old Zephaniah were to come back and gaze at America this Christmas, I think he would be saddened to see us closing our minds and hearts to the genuine pain of the world. But also, I think he would reiterate his call to us to join the God of the universe in the work of gathering and caring for all those in the world of God who at this time need a special kind of care. For this year we have many babies who have been born in stables and barns, who are threatened by those fearful ones who like their power as it is, whose families have been forced to flee their homes to find refuge from the terror of their day. In those children we may see the power of God, the call of God for us, the righteousness of God in action.” Are those words from John Holbert giving you courage to be a fear disperser?

God is love. Fear does not come from God. Over and over again in the Christmas story, God urges us to “fear not” for God’s love is triumphing over every fear. Homiletics explains, “We do not vanquish fear by denying or avoiding fear. We need to admit that fear is as much a part of the Christmas story as peace and joy. It actually helps to have a frank acknowledgment of our fears. For it is only by moving through our fears to the joy that awaits us on the other side that we truly grasp the triumphant good news of the Christ child coming into the world.”

“Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light; the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.” Words from the Christmas carol, “O Little Town of Bethlehem” written in 1868, by pastor Phillips Brooks. The Civil War had ended only three years earlier. The United States was in ruins. Families had been decimated by the carnage of the most brutal war America had ever known. Wives and mothers counted themselves lucky if their husbands and sons had come home lacking an arm or a leg or an eye, shivering with post traumatic stress disorder. Poverty, homelessness, and hate were rampant. In 1868, it gave Americans some comfort to picture the humble Bethlehem stable as the place where hope and fear meet each other — and most importantly where hope emerges the ultimate victor.

Kathleen Norris says, “the Incarnation is the place where hope contends with fear.” The Good News is love overcoming every fear. Jesus took on flesh to move into our lives, to experience our fears, to know your every fear so God can disperse every fear and fill us with joyful love. Jesus came so we can see God’s glory, so we can be set free from our fears, so we can fully love and rejoice.

John the Baptist proclaimed the good news, repent, turn from fear, turn to love. The water of baptism washes away our fear, shame, guilt, brokenness, imperfections, and sin. The water symbolizes the Holy Spirit filling us with every goodness, blessing, and assurance that we are a cherished beloved member of God’s family. The good news of God overcoming fear with joyful love quickly spread drawing people to be baptized. In gratitude, people desired to thank God. John told people to partner with God in practical ways, in your daily life, to disperse the fear of others and fill them with joyful love.

**Luke 3:10-16 NLT: The crowds asked John the Baptist, “What should we do?” John replied, “If you have two shirts, give one to the poor. If you have food, share it with those who are hungry.” Even corrupt tax collectors came to be baptized and asked, “Teacher, what should we do?” John replied, “Collect no more taxes than the government requires.” “What should we do?” asked some soldiers. John replied, “Don’t extort money or make false accusations. And be content with your pay.” Everyone was expecting the Messiah to come soon, and they were eager to know whether John might be the Messiah. John answered their questions by saying, “I baptize you with water; but someone is coming soon who is greater than I am—so much greater that I’m not even worthy to be his slave and untie the straps of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”**

Can you hear the fear in the questions of those being baptized? “What should we do?” Each of us can speed up the coming time when every fear has been vanquished. The Holy Spirit is constantly serving us, enabling us, to be fully alive by washing away our fear and invigorating us to lavishly love without exception. Fear is stifled when you let grace cleanse the past, hope reveals the future, and live in the present. Sleep, eat, go to school or work, care for your friends and family, serve those around you, love everyone all with the knowledge that God too is dispersing fear with love.

John the Baptist pinpoints a fear of each person who was baptized so that fear can be washed away and replaced with grateful, loving service. The crowd was afraid they would not have enough food and clothing. John told them, "If you have two shirts, give one to the poor. If you have food, share it with those who are hungry." Because we, humanity, as a whole, have not overcome our fear of scarcity, we do not fully share. God created an abundant world with plenty of resources, food, clothing, shelter, health care, education, leisure activities for all if we all share.

The tax collectors were afraid they would not have enough money. John told them, "Collect no more taxes than the government requires." Discover the freedom and joy of a simple life that is free from the fear of greed, hoarding, and justifying being a workaholic.

The soldiers were afraid of their reputation. John told them, "Don't extort money or make false accusations. And be content with your pay." Use your power, position, and resources to do good and serve.

Imagine you are about to be baptized by John the Baptist. What fear are you ready to let God wash away? What is God saying to you?

God is continually being born into each of us and always loving to disperse our fear. In the birth of Jesus, we glimpse our future where ever fear is vanquished, where we are fully alive, where we are in harmonious relationship with all people.

Have you noticed that in, "A Charlie Brown Christmas", just before Linus begins his recitation of the birth of Jesus, he drops his security blanket? Over the years of drawing his comic strip, Charles Schulz would occasionally deprive Linus of his blanket. Every time this happens, this otherwise cool, calm, and wise-beyond-his-years character dissolves into frenzied fear. Linus simply cannot be without his blanket. Except in this moment, when he's standing on stage reciting the Christmas story. With the Christ child on his mind Linus is free from all his fears.

"Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light; the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." May each of us discover anew how God is vanquishing our fears and invigorating us with joyful love. Amen