

When 'Fear Not' May Not Seem Like Enough

Psalm 27: 1-6

Ephesians 5: 8-14

If you have been listening to the news, you have heard again and again about the corona virus. My niece Erica and her husband Jacob are now in quarantine because Jacob has been exposed to the virus and is showing symptoms in New York City. As more and more cases are discovered and we hear of large businesses and even Connecticut College where Andrew attends are sending the students home, and now sports event being cancelled, you cannot help but to experience a bit of fear. I heard someone say the other day—'Maybe it is good to instill fear in people about this virus. It might keep them from getting it.'

In fact, fear has the opposite reaction. Trauma is something that occurs when the psyche is overwhelmed by such emotions as fear and feelings of helplessness. It is why some of our veterans return with acute trauma often referred to as PTSD. They have been faced in combat with so much fear and the inability to escape the danger that they have become overwhelmed. It is also not surprising that many of these soldiers and veterans also develop medical conditions. Why? Because fear does other things in addition to overwhelming the psyche. It can actually impede the immune system to the point that we are more vulnerable to disease.

Multiple experiments have been done on the impact of fear on the immune system. The effect that fear has on the brain actually shuts down parts of the brain which in turn shuts down some of the functions of the body leaving us open to pathogens. So I think we can all agree that fear is not something we want to give into.

The Bible tells us this too. It tells us that fear is not something that we want to feel. I am sure that you are all familiar with the various parts of the Christmas story when angels proclaim this message again and again. "Fear not!" The Angel Gabriel tells Mary when Gabriel tells her that she will become the mother of God' son. They tell Joseph not to be afraid when they come to him in a dream and tell him to take Mary as his wife. And you all remember the angels coming to the shepherds with their proclamation of Jesus' birth. How does that begin? 'Fear not!' In all of these is the message God will be there for you.

Just for fun, I looked up how many times these same words 'fear not' were used throughout the Old and New testaments. I found 170 places where this phrase was used. That is very often. So maybe God is trying to tell us something.

So, you might be thinking, if God tells me to fear not about this virus, I can just sit back and be confident that it will never come anywhere near me

or those I love. Ever heard the phrase “God helps those who help themselves?”

Remember the old story about the man whose house was washed away in a flood. He prayed to God to rescue him. He heard God's voice saying I will save you. Soon, he heard the radio announcer who told him to leave his home, and evacuate. Instead, the man managed to climb on the roof and stayed there hoping he would be rescued. Again he prayed and felt confident that he heard God's voice saying “Fear not, my son. I will save you.” When he opened his eyes he looked around to see a man rowing a boat, “Come aboard!” called the person paddling the boat. “I'll take you to safety.” I could easily jump in, get into that boat and be carried to safety,” he thought. But he refused the rower of the boat, and he thought, “No, God said that he would save me and I know that he will.” He continued in prayer.

Soon a helicopter flew overhead and a man threw out a rope for him to grasp. “No,” he called out. “Go on. God will save me.” So the helicopter went on. The man waited and waited and it started to grow dark. The darker it got the more he was filled with fear. Finally, he called out “God, you said that you would save me! Where are you?” and suddenly a voice came from the gathering clouds—somewhat like Charlton Heston or

James Earl Jones and so he knew it must be the voice of God. And the voice said “I *sent* you a warning to evacuate from the radio announcer, a rowboat and a helicopter. What more do you want?”

I don’t think God would respond like that but it makes for a good story. The point is that God is there for us but sometimes we have to help the cause as well.

In our Scripture today the psalmist expresses confident that God will be there for him. ‘O Lord, you are the light that keeps me safe.’ “In times of trouble, you will protect me.” And to the Ephesians, Paul likens them to people who lived in the dark but Christ brought light into their lives. Don’t take part in all that is done in the dark—in the expressions of fear and helplessness. Christ brings you the light.

But I mentioned earlier that you cannot just sit by like the man on the roof, passively expecting God to swoop in and miraculously save us from the fear that is currently plaguing us. So what do we do instead of letting fear grip us in the face of this national illness?

Along with all the frightening news you hear, there have also been some important suggestions offered by knowledgeable sources like the CDC. You are familiar with them but let me highlight a few.

- Take care of yourself if you are sick. Stay home to avoid spreading to others.
- Avoid touching your face—particularly your eyes, nose, and mouth.
- If possible, cough and sneeze into a disposable tissue and then discard it. Use your elbow only if you need to.
- Avoid communal food where people help themselves, such as a buffet.
- Wash down or do not touch some of the germiest places—door knobs, banisters, telephones (although today most of us have personal cell phones but be aware where you put it.)
- Avoid large crowds
- If you are over 70 and have another compromised medical condition you might want to be especially wary of crowds. If you need to go to the market or store, go when there is less likely to be crowds. And wipe the shopping carts. JoAnn Brandeberry has offered to shop for people who need groceries from Market Basket.

And above all

- Wash your hands often with soap and water for 20 seconds. Use hand sanitizer if soap/water is not available.

We all learn the importance of hand washing growing up when you emerge from the bathroom to Mom's familiar refrain "Did you wash your hands?" How many of you have learned to sing Yankee Doodle, then Happy Birthday, then the Alphabet song. Each of these songs goes on for the required amount of time for adequate hand washing. Sure you can sing it to yourself in your head as I often do even now, or even out loud.

Have you ever wondered how people figured out that hand washing was so vital? I had wondered in passing this week, when I heard an interesting radio spot on National Public Radio that explained how hand washing to cut infection got started.

In 1844 at Vienna General Hospital was filled with mothers giving birth. But something terrible was happening. Many were dying of childbed fever, which caused them to be in a great deal of pain, delirious and die. The population of mothers giving birth became so overwhelming for staff that they split the hospital in two—half staffed by doctors and the other half by midwives. Strangely enough the child bed fever continued despite the small number of patients to staff but most of the deaths were on the doctors' side of the hospital. One of the doctor's Ignaz Semmelweis needed

to know why. He did experiments to determine why this was happening. He even looked at the conditions in each of the units. Remember this was before people knew about bacteria and germs. He found that doctors were doing autopsies and immediately tending to women in childbirth. Was it the scalpel? Eventually he realized that the doctors were so pressed for time that they were not washing their hands between the autopsies and the next patient. They were not washing their hands. Once they were told to wash with disinfectant, the deaths were significantly reduced.

God does not want us to live in fear, but we do need to do whatever we can to avoid the spread of this virus. For this reason, we will no longer be shaking hands as you leave. I suggest that we give each other a peace symbol. And it is actually quite appropriate. Shaking hands originated long ago when a man carried a weapon. Since most people are right handed, extending the right hand said "I come in peace. See there I no weapon in my hand". On the other hand, the peace symbol means 'peace be with you'. How much more appropriate for the end of worship?

As we leave here today I ask you to think about the words of God and his angels who said "Fear not, for I am with you." This is not the first time there was such fear. Remember after the events of 9/11. And yet when we conquered our fear then, we were able to work together and appreciate the

good in one another. Thinking about that time, I leave you with a piece of a poem that provides a wonderful message:

When some great sorrow, like a mighty river,
Flows through your life with peace-destroying power,
And dearest things are swept from sight forever,
Say to your heart each trying hour:
" This, too, shall pass away. "

When ceaseless toil has hushed your song of gladness,
And you have grown almost too tired to pray,
Let this truth banish from your heart its sadness,
And ease the burdens of each trying day:
" This, too, shall pass away. "

Remembering this and relying on our benevolent God, we will get thru this crisis.