

God Meets Us In Our Fear
Sermon 162 | Greystone Baptist Church | December 4, 2022
Luke 1:26-38

About this time, two years ago, *Christianity Today* published an article revealing a record number of people turned to the internet to search the Bible for a word of peace in an uncertain and chaotic world. With an unprecedented year of a global pandemic, the eruption of racial tensions, and a contentious political election, Americans were searching for peace.

Interestingly, Bible searches spiked in correlation with major events, according to data pulled from the YouVersion Bible App. “Fear” was the app’s top search in the first few months of the year. “Justice” took the top spot in the spring and then the word “healing” trended upward throughout the rest of the year.¹

The Bible Gateway website also reported similar data, noting that people searched for verses about God taking away sickness 90 times more often than pre-pandemic queries on this topic. Bible Gateway also saw an uptick in searches related to racism, justice, and oppression in the weeks following George Floyd’s death; and searches on government authority were up at least 50 times the average on Election Day.²

Through it all, it was Isaiah’s prophetic words: *Do not fear*. That stole the hearts of seekers - and the top spot among most commonly read verses - in this incredibly difficult time.

The prophet offers these words many times in his collection of sayings and writings. They are peppered in between warnings of destruction as foreign enemies lie in wait, ready to kill, plunder, and steal the land of the Israelites. Isaiah interprets these looming invasions as God’s punishment on the people for their greed which has led them to forget about the poor, the widowed, the orphaned... the outcast, and he urges the people to change their ways. While the collection of Isaiah’s writings found in our Bibles today can be a difficult read - probably because we are guilty of the same sins - these words of hope and comfort sprinkled in between all the doom and gloom remind us that (a) we are not the first to experience chaos and despair and (b) that when these seasons come, God meets us there.

Do not fear, for I am with you.
Do not be afraid, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you; I will help you;
I will uphold you with my victorious right hand. (41:10)

¹ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/december/most-popular-verse-youversion-app-bible-gateway-fear-covid.html>

² *Ibid.*

I wonder if these same words echoed through Mary's mind as she pondered Gabriel's visitation.

Though the circumstances were quite different, in the case of Isaiah, a nation is on the brink of destruction of a war waged by a foreign enemy. In the case of Mary, it is a more private promise of destruction when she - as a young woman, betrothed and about to begin her life - sees it all come crashing down with this horrifying yet somehow hopeful news.

Though the circumstances are different, the promise of God's presence in the midst of fear remains the same.

Sometimes our fears are widespread and globally recognized. Like the arrival of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 or the Russian invasion of Ukraine earlier this year. These moments draw us out of our comfortable sense of stability and into a public state of shock and dismay. Together, and with one voice we cry out for God's presence.

And yet other times our fears are invoked by more personal circumstances. The loss of a job, the news of cutbacks and layoffs, a scary diagnosis, or just a general sense of instability or uncertainty - things we cannot share with our friends and family because so much is up in the air. In these seasons, our prayers for God's intervention are far more personal... and sometimes because of that, the waiting can be excruciatingly lonely.

We can begin to wonder if even God has abandoned us to suffer and struggle through the scariest moments of our lives.

I don't know about you, but when I am afraid, I begin reacting instead of responding.

Fear acts like a stimulus and evokes a sort of fight or flight reaction. When we are afraid, we can start jumping to conclusions, or grasping at straws, anything to change the situation or neutralize the threat. We will do anything to re-order our world so that we do not have to be afraid.

And yet the words of scripture so often name that fear is a reality of human life. And what's more, that fear is a reality of the Christian life.

If it were not true, why would the refrain, *do not fear*, echo so prominently in the stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs, from the lips of Hebrew prophets and biblical poets, from the mouth of Jesus himself when he is resurrected from the tomb if fear were not an essential part of the journey, why would it be addressed time and time again?

In her book, *This Here Flesh*, author Cole Arthur Riley writes about Psalm 23:

"I find it beautiful that in the face of terror, God doesn't bid us toward courage as we might perceive it, instead [God] draws us toward fear as a central sister, rest. A sister who is not

meant to replace fear, but to exist together in tension and harmony with it. For fear's origin is not evil, though evil certainly wields it against our souls daily."

Isn't that fascinating?

That in the face of terror, God doesn't bid us toward courage as we might perceive it, but instead draws us toward *REST*.

Hearing this I cannot help but imagine Mary who over and over again in the Gospels claims her own God-given authority to stop time, to pause, rest, and reflect as she ponders the things that are happening around her - some really scary situations.

Like this one, when Gabriel visits and she learns that she will endure the scrutiny of society when her unwed pregnancy becomes public concern. She doesn't react with fight or flight, she finds another way... and in so doing Mary teaches us how to welcome rest as a sister of fear.

Viktor Frankl says it this way: "Between stimulus and response there is a space. [And] In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and freedom."³

In other words when fear comes rushing in - though we may feel the need to react immediately - there is a space. And in that space, we can allow ourselves to think, to believe, to breathe, and to trust... in that space we can like Mary, ponder and rest... in that space we can pause - not for forever (!) - but for long enough to allow the ancient refrain that bears witness to God's continued presence with us to overwhelm our hearts and give us the courage to do the work that God is calling us toward.

In a recent podcast, Tricia Hersey, (who is an author, scholar, theologian, and self-proclaimed Nap Bishop) says that rest is the language of resistance. Rest denies everything that tries to control us because rest frees the mind to imagine a new way forward. A way that is not defined by our economy, our society, or any other force that oppresses and represses the holy spark that lives within us all... rest frees us and enables us to see a way forward.⁴

Maybe rest is the way through fear - an essential sister - because rest allows us the imagination required to see what God is doing.

In the opening litany today we heard responses to the question: *What are you afraid of?*

³ <https://brenebrown.com/articles/2022/05/09/creating-space/?fbclid=IwAR1VJ7lrzuAkXZwd47TaYINgvzSdXqXG9SUsGI0WFZSnhf972QfPSCVEBrU>

⁴ Tricia Hersey on, *We Can Do Hard Things: No More Grind: How to Finally Rest with Tricia Hersey*. Season 1, Episode 139. October 13, 2022. More on Tricia Hersey at <https://thenapministry.wordpress.com/>

Not being enough
Not making enough of a difference
Falling down
Forgetting
Destroying our planet
Gun violence
Mental health
Not having anyone to care for me, for us...
Ending up alone
Stopping short of following God all the way ...

Maybe this list includes your greatest fears, maybe it doesn't? Maybe there is something you would add... *What are YOU afraid of?*

Being a bad parent?
Failing at work?
Not having the money to buy all the presents...
Not having the time to get it all done...
Making a bad grade on the test at school
Not getting into the college or graduate school of your choice?
Not getting the job or promotion you thought you were sure to get...

What are we afraid of?

And how are we facing those fears?

Are we among the droves of people who turned to the Bible in 2020?

Are we among those who continue to search the pages of scripture for comfort and peace in the midst of our fear?

And when those timeless refrains wash over us echoing the words of the prophets: *Do not fear...* Are we brave enough to pause and ponder and rest so that we can free our imaginations just enough to glimpse a different kind of future that God may be trying to create with and through us?

I know it is Advent, and Christmas is just around the corner - making our lives busy and chaotic and full of stress and anxiety and so much of that is rooted in the fears we have named together just now. But we really want to find the peace that God is offering us - even in those fearful places - maybe we should learn something from Mary who was brave enough to ponder, to pause, to rest.... And to trust that God was with her every step of the way.