No Fear

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Luke 2:8-14

December 21, 2014
There are two types of fear. There is the normal, God-given emotion called fear. God created us with this capacity for fear as a natural response to imminent danger. Fear can also be an illogical and exaggerated response to something.

If I’m hiking in the woods and come upon an enormous grizzly bear, I’m going to feel afraid. Such fear would be altogether justified. Yet, let’s suppose I visit a zoo and see a grizzly bear in a cage and become frightened. Such fear would be excessive. There’s no justification for my fear if the bear is locked in a cage.

The clinical name for this exaggerated and illogical fear is a phobia. There are at least 500 phobias common enough to have names. These common phobias illustrate the point: there is the fear of public speaking (glossophobia), the fear of heights (acrophobia) and the fear of closed-in spaces (claustrophobia). I had intended to post a snake on the screen to represent the fear of snakes (ophidiophobia) but I knew it would make some of you afraid and you wouldn’t listen to anything else I had to say.

Did you know that there is a phobia associated with hearing sermons? In the psychiatric world it’s called homilophobia. I’m not making this up! Homilophobia is a persistent and abnormal fear of sermons. It is usually accompanied by heavy breathing, irregular heartbeat, excessive sweating, nausea and shaking. You may have friends or family who suffer from this kind of phobia.

Don’t try this excuse at home, kids. “Mom and dad, I can’t possibly go to church today. I have homilophobia.”

Fear factors big time into the Christmas story we’re reading this Advent. On the first Sunday of Advent, we studied the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth. On the second Sunday, we considered the promise of Jesus’ coming from Mary’s point of view. Last Sunday, we examined this same story from Joseph’s vantage point. Today, our story is about shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night.
All four people or groups of people have two things in common. First, they are visited by angels. Angels are a source of endless fascination to people. Consider how often they are depicted in modern life or famous paintings of antiquity. Angels in Scripture are created beings who serve as God’s messengers.

Second, these angels tell every person in our story not to be afraid. When an angel appears to Zechariah as he’s offering sacrifice in the temple he is told, “Do not be afraid” (Luke 1:13). When Mary expresses understandable fear at the angel’s surprise visit, this angel announces, “Do not be afraid” (Luke 1:30). When Joseph contemplates breaking off his engagement with Mary after hearing the news of her unplanned pregnancy, an angel appears to him in a dream and says, “Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife” (Matthew 1:20). In today’s lesson, an angel’s visitation to frightened shepherds is introduced with the words, “Do not be afraid” (Luke 2:10).

No Christmas pageant would be complete without shepherds. No doubt you’ve seen them—children dressed up in gunny sacks wielding shepherd’s crooks. We’ve sentimentalized this story so much that we forget that shepherds were at the bottom rung of the social ladder. They were considered unclean according to the standards of Mosaic Law. Since they must be on the job 24/7, there was no way for them to keep the Sabbath day holy.

The angel’s appearance to poor shepherds is nothing short of scandalous. The fact that God singles out average working Joes to first announce the Messiah’s birth is shocking. People would have expected God’s revelation to the wise and cultured, but not to the ordinary and marginalized.

An average shepherd in those days was responsible for about 100 sheep. Each evening, shepherds would corral their sheep into an enclosure called a sheepfold. I’ve read this passage so often about shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night that these words are seared in my memory. The language suggests these shepherds take turns each evening guarding each other’s sheep from thieves and predators. They form a sort of cooperative to provide relief to weary shepherds at nightfall.
Time must go by slowly when you’re watching sheep at night. An appearance by angels would scare even the heartiest shepherds. Most artwork portrays angels as hovering over the scene even though Luke reports that “an angel of the Lord stood before them” (2:9).

Behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people” (2:10). Behold is an old-fashioned word. I would liken it to someone coming over the PA to announce, “Can I have your attention?”

These shepherds must have wondered what they have done wrong to warrant this nocturnal visitor. The angel continues, “To you this day in the city of David, a Savior has been born, who is Christ the Lord” (2:11). This is the point in the story where a choir of angels appears and sing, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men” (2:14).

Do not fear, Zechariah and Elizabeth. Do not fear, Mary and Joseph. Do not fear, lowly shepherds. Do not fear, you people of the Lord.

I’m struck with how many times in the gospels Jesus tells his followers not to fear. When Jesus walks on water and Peter becomes fearful, Jesus tells him, “Do not be afraid” (Matthew 14:27). When Jesus is transformed on a mountain before three of his closest disciples, he tells them “Do not be afraid.” (Matthew 17:7). When Jesus encounters a distressed father named Jairus, at the sudden death of his daughter, he says, “Do not be afraid” (Luke 8:50). When his 12 disciples become fearful of coming persecution, Jesus reassures them, “Do not be afraid” (Matthew 10:26-31). When these same disciples are worrying about the future, Jesus admonishes them, “Do not be afraid, little flock” (Luke 12:32). When the women encounter the risen Christ on the road to the tomb, he announces to them, “Do not be afraid” (Matthew 28:10).

I said earlier that there are two types of fear. There is a normal, ordinary, garden-variety fear. The other kind of fear is illogical and exaggerated. It’s the second kind of illogical fear that Jesus calls out in his ministry.

Some of you may regard doubt as faith’s opposite. But Scripture doesn’t speak of doubt this way. Doubt isn’t necessarily the enemy of faith.
Honest doubt keeps faith dynamic and growing. When Thomas expresses doubt at the news of Jesus’ resurrection, Jesus doesn’t say, “Thomas, what’s your problem? Don’t you know better?” He invites Thomas to touch his hands and side (John 20:25).

In late October, on the Discovery Channel, Nik Wallenda attempted a daring high-wire walk between two office buildings in Chicago. Nik is a 7th generation member of the famous circus family called the Flying Wallendas. In our first picture, Nik is waving to 60,000 people who are watching 600 feet below in downtown Chicago. A ¾-inch cable has been strung between two skyscrapers, a distance of two city blocks. In the second picture, you can see that the wire is tilted at a 15 degree angle which is exponentially more difficult to navigate than a flat surface. Notice he’s also not wearing a safety harness and there’s no net below. He has a microphone around his neck, so throughout the walk he’s talking to his dad and praying to God. At one point he says, “To God be the glory. This is what I’m made for.” In the third picture, after completing the first leg of his journey, he traverses the final section of the wire blindfolded.

As a motivational speaker, Nik Wallenda talks with people about taking risks and facing fears. He readily admits the biggest challenge for any aerialist is overcoming fear. As he likes to say, “Trust God; don’t give in to your fears.”

So what difference does this sermon make in my life? I have three suggestions for your consideration this morning.

First, name your fears. I’ve listed some big fears: the future, having enough money, having a hard conversation with someone, kids and family, job or school. Don’t stress about everything. Localize your fear.

Second, pray about your fears. At the start of my day, I sometimes practice a “palms down, palms up” exercise in prayer. I place my palms down on the obstacles and challenges I imagine facing that day. I then turn my palms over and release these concerns to God in prayer. Later, when I find fear and anxiety creeping back into my life, I offer up flash prayers: Help me, Lord. Give me strength. Lord, have mercy.
Third, meditate on Scripture to reduce the hold fear has on our lives. Shift the emphasis away from the fear at hand to God’s sustaining presence. I’ve identified seven verses for your consideration this week, one for each day of the week. These passages are available on a single sheet in the lobby and also on our website. I know some of you are crazy-busy this week, entertaining family and sharing Christmas traditions. Each passage is easy enough to commit to memory so you can carry it with you throughout the day. Take Monday’s passage from Genesis, “Do not fear, for the Lord is your shield” (15:1). How can God shield you this week from excessive worry and fear? Consider Tuesday’s passage from Isaiah, “Do not fear, I am with you” (41:10) or Wednesday’s verse from 1 John that “perfect love casts out fear” (4:18).

Trust God; don’t give in to your fears.

The Seven Passages for the week:
Dec 21     Luke 2:10
Dec 22    Isaiah 41:10
Dec 23    Genesis 15:1
Dec 24    1 John 4:18
Dec 25    Mark 6:50
Dec 26    Joshua 1:9
Dec 27    John 14:27