

**“DO NOT FEAR”**

Isaiah 41:10-13

I was startled from sleep that night by a ferocious Florida storm. Lightning flashed. Thunder boomed. Rain pelted. Wind howled. Branches clawed at my bedroom window with bony, brittle fingers. And in the dark interludes between bolts of brilliance and peals of doom—monsters. Monsters multiplying in every shadowy corner, Monsters with glowing yellow eyes and jagged tombstone teeth. Monsters with an appetite for ten-year-old boys wearing Underdog pajamas. “Never fear. Underdog is here.”

But I did fear. So, I sounded the alarm. “Dad!” I screamed. “Dad!” And a moment later, the bedroom door swung open and hall light spilled in. Then, dad was sitting next to me on my bed. “What’s wrong?” he said, half-asleep. “I’m afraid,” I answered. “Afraid of what?” he asked. “Afraid of the storm,” I replied. “Afraid of the...the monsters.” And suddenly, his arms, those strong, loving arms I can still feel decades later, were wrapped around me. Dad said in a reassuring voice: “Son, there is nothing to be afraid of.”

“There is nothing to be afraid of.” I have no idea how often I heard that phrase as a child; or for that matter, how often I repeated it to my own children when they were afraid—of the dark, of playground bullies, of the first day of school. And yet, no matter how well-intended, “nothing to be afraid of” is not entirely accurate, is it? In reality, there are many things that can cause fear, if we let them.

World events, for example. Our world is an increasingly dangerous and chaotic place, filled with wars, riots, racism, natural disasters, senseless crimes, unspeakable evil, blatant injustice, and acts of terrorism. The purpose of terrorism is to terrify. Jesus Himself described the final age of the earth as an age of terror, saying in Luke 21:26, **“Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world.”** And He added in the same chapter, **“There will be fearful events.”**

You and I witness these fearful events in the daily newspaper and on the nightly news. Chemical weapons in Syria. Nuclear weapons in North Korea and Iran. Growing tensions with China and Russia. Identity theft. ISIS and Al Qaeda. Mass shootings. And many are wondering, “What is happening? Is anyone safe? Will I be next?”

Financial difficulties can be frightening. Despite improvements in the U.S. economy, our nation is still plagued by bankruptcies, foreclosures, and a \$21 trillion national debt, which is increasing at an average rate of \$3.8 billion daily. In more personal terms: “What if I lose my job? What if I have to take a part-time job with no health benefits? What if I can’t pay the mortgage or buy groceries or afford my prescription medications?”

What of health concerns? Life can be turned inside out and upside down by an unexpected injury, accident, or medical diagnosis. For years, my dad warned me against too much exposure to the hot Florida sun—too much beach-time, too many sunburns. I listened politely, but disregarded his advice because I was young, healthy, tan, and most of all, invincible.

Then, in 2013, I developed a malignant melanoma that required surgery. And my perspective on invincibility changed to fear. Somehow, I was ten-years-old again, wearing Underdog pajamas; in the middle of another storm: lightning, thunder, and monsters in every corner. I called the Cancer Center daily, asking, “Why haven’t I been referred to a surgeon yet? Why hasn’t my surgery been scheduled yet? And why aren’t you answering my phone calls on the first ring?”

Additionally, relationships can cause fear. People who go through a divorce often fear future relationships. “Why make myself vulnerable again?” they ask. “Why risk the pain?” Sadly, this same fear of marriage is then passed on to their children, who think: “I know what happened to mom and dad. All that arguing. All that hurt and bitterness. That’s not for me. I’ll never get married. Never.”

And for many individuals, nothing causes more fear than the prospect of death. People who, according to Hebrews 2:15, “**all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.**”

During the two years I worked as a Family Services Advisor at Lakeland Memorial Gardens, I was also required to sell pre-need funeral arrangements. I quickly learned that, despite all the advantages of making these end-of-life preparations—lower costs, better choices, financing, and most of all, removing this heavy burden from grieving loved ones—still, the majority of people I talked with refused to even contemplate their own death. Ironically, I offered a service everyone needed and no one wanted.

Of course, not all fear is wrong or unjustified. God equipped us with the emotional response of fear to alert us to danger. Hopefully, everyone here today has a healthy fear of high-voltage power lines and intoxicated drivers and the spinning blades of a lawnmower.

Yet, a healthy fear becomes unhealthy when it consumes and controls us; when it fills our lives with doom, gloom, excessive anxiety, and the dismal expectation of the Absolute Worst That Can Happen. This is the type of fear the Bible warns against. And the reason for this warning is clear. When our lives are characterized by terror; when we are constantly and hopelessly afraid, we are living as if we had no God—or as if the God we did have was weak, unloving, and unreliable.

Paralyzing fear is at odds with faith. Do you remember the storm on the Sea of Galilee, when Jesus walked on water and then empowered Simon Peter to do the same?

Imagine the faith and conviction it took for Peter to step out of the boat and onto the white-capped waves of the lake—this amid the howling wind and pelting rain, the bolts of lightning and booms of thunder. At first, all went well. Peter walked on water. I wonder what he was thinking? “Look at me. I’m doing it. I’m really-”

But the instant Peter shifted his eyes from Christ to his perilous circumstances, he began to sink. Literally. And after snatching Peter to safety, what did Jesus say to him? Significantly, Jesus did not say, “Peter, why were you so afraid?” Instead, Jesus said, **“You of little faith, why did you doubt?”** Matthew 14:31. Doubting God can quickly become the cause of uncontrolled, paralyzing fear. Doubting God’s love. Doubting God’s power. Doubting God’s willingness.

My friends, what do you fear today? Do you fear world events? Do you fear terrorism? Do you fear illness or growing old or living alone or being rejected? Do you fear for the well-being of your children or the condition of your marriage or the size of your retirement fund? What circumstances are keeping you awake at night and ruining your appetite and robbing you of peace?

Frankly, I’m tired of being afraid, aren’t you? I’m tired of giving fear a place in my life and relationships. I’m tired of lying sleepless at night, and reaching for another antacid, and always expecting the worst from God instead of His very best. I don’t want to placate fear or to compromise with fear or to negotiate with fear. I want to defeat fear. And in Bible passages like Isaiah 41:10-13 and multitudes of others, the Spirit of God tells us how—tells us: **“Do not fear.”**

**First, if you are afraid of something today, take your fears to God in prayer.** Be specific. “God, I’m afraid I may lose my God.” “God, I’m afraid I may not recover from this illness.” “God, I’m afraid of being alone.” “God, I’m afraid I won’t have the strength or will to resist this temptation.” Articulating your fears to God will not only help you distinguish between real fears and imaginary fears; it will give you the peace of heart and mind that can only come from committing your fears to God.

Paul wrote this to the Philippians: **“Do not be anxious about anything.”** *Wait, Paul. Did you say anything? My health? My family? My finances?* Yes, that is exactly what he said, though it is not all he said. **“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus,”** Philippians 4:6-7. What a blessed exchange. You give God your fears. God gives you His peace.

**Second, when you are afraid, remember that God has not called you to a life of fear.** Far from it. Paul told Timothy: **“For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love, and of self-discipline,”** 2 Timothy 1:7. The Greek word translated as “power” in this verse is DUNAMIS, from which we derive

our English word DYNAMITE. The ‘dynamite’ of the Holy Spirit working in us through the word of God.

The phrases **“do not fear”** and **“do not be afraid”** and similar words occur more than three-hundred and twenty-five times in the Bible. I wonder if God is trying to tell us something? In a real sense, **“do not fear”** is the essence of the Gospel message. When Jesus Christ was born that First Christmas, the skies over Bethlehem rent asunder with song. And an angel of the Lord told terrified shepherds: **“Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord,”** Luke 2:10-11.

Indeed, when we read our Bibles, we find God telling His people—this means you and me—**“do not fear”** in every conceivable situation, from the smallest tasks to the most hopeless circumstances.

When Abraham faced the human impossibility of fathering a child in his old age, God said to him, **“Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward,”** Genesis 15:1. When the Israelites stood terrified on the shore of the Red Sea, hemmed in by rocky terrain and narrow passes, and with Pharaoh’s mighty army in feverish pursuit, Moses told the people, **“Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today,”** Exodus 14:13.

When Jesus taught His disciples not to worry about the basic necessities of life, food and drink and clothing, He said to them, **“Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom,”** Luke 12:32. When the daughter of Jairus died, even then Jesus said to the grieving parents, **“Do not be afraid; just believe, and she will be healed,”** Luke 8:50.

The text for today, Isaiah 41:10-13, was written at a time of great fear for the southern kingdom of Judah. The northern kingdom of Samaria had already been enslaved and deported by the cruel Assyrians. And now, led by ruthless King Sennacherib, the Assyrian army threatened to do the same to Judah. In fact, according to Isaiah 36, emissaries of Sennacherib stood at the very gates of Jerusalem, shouting, taunting, mocking: **“Do not let Hezekiah mislead you when he says, ‘The LORD will deliver us.’ Has the god of any nation delivered his land from the hand of the king of Assyria?”** Isaiah 36:18.

Yet, in the face of such opposition and evil, the Lord God assured His people: **“So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with My righteous right hand,”** Isaiah 41:10. And if these words sound familiar, it’s because they are at least in part the source of our next hymn, #427:3, “Fear not, I am with thee, oh, be not dismayed; for I

am thy God and will still give thee aid; I'll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand, upheld by My righteous omnipotent hand."

**Third, when you are afraid, remember that God Himself is with you.** The same God who created the universe by speaking it into existence. **"Let there be,"** He said. And there was. The same of whom we confess three Sundays out of every four: "I believe in God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth." The same God who redeemed us from our sins through the priceless blood of His own Son.

Yes, in times of trouble, we may wonder if this God is truly with us. But His solemn, unbreakable, irrevocable promises are these: **"Do not fear; for I am with you,"** Isaiah 41:10. And this: **"Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you,"** Hebrews 13:5. And this: **"Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age,"** Matthew 28:20.

And because these words, God's words, are true, we also say with the psalmist, **"The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?"** Psalm 27:1. Whom? A petty dictator in North Korea? A pesky problem at the office? A struggling marriage? A poor medical report? A stay in the hospital? The aches and pains of aging? Never. God is not a temporary Helper or a part-time Savior. He doesn't clock in at 8:00 AM and leave promptly at 5:00 PM. He doesn't arrive for the good times and depart hurriedly during the bad times. Instead, He has said, "I am with you; so don't be afraid." And more than this, He has said, **"for I am your God,"** Isaiah 41:10.

**Fourth, when you are afraid, remember how the One True God became your God.** He became your God by choice, not by accident. He became your God because He wanted you, not because He was obligated to you. He became your God because He was willing to sacrifice what was most precious to Him, namely, His Son, Jesus Christ, in order to redeem you. And if God was willing to sacrifice His own Son for you, do you really believe He will withhold any other blessing from your life? No. Of course not. So, why then should you be afraid of anything?

Each time you feel fear creeping into your life, place it into the great equation of Paul in Romans 8: **"What, then, shall we say in response to this?"** In response to what? In response to any problem in our lives—illness, heartache, loss. Paul's answer was this: **"If God is for us, who can be against us?"**

**Fifth and finally, when afraid, remember that God will give you the strength to endure and overcome any burden.** You have His word on it. His word is this: **"I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with My righteous right hand. All who rage against you will surely be ashamed and disgraced; those who oppose you will be as nothing and perish. Though you search for your enemies, you will not find them. Those who wage war against you will be as nothing at all,"**

Isaiah 41:10-13. So then, when you and I say “I can’t fix this problem” or “I can’t endure this burden” or “I can’t take this situation any longer”—clearly, there is entirely too much “I” and too little God. **“I will strengthen you,”** said God. I will. When or where did He ever ask us to find the strength within ourselves?

So, what have we learned today? No matter what, God will be with us. No matter what, God will strengthen us. No matter what, God will provide for us. No matter what, God will protect and deliver us.

Let me ask you then: Do you believe what you learned today? Do you believe that God loves you with all of His infinite heart? Do you believe that God loved you enough to sacrifice His only Son for you? Do you believe that God has the power to do anything? Do you believe that God Himself will fight every battle for you, and bring about a glorious conclusion that you could have never imagined or accomplished on your own? Do you believe the promise God made at the conclusion of today’s text? **“For I am the LORD, your God, who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, ‘Do not fear, I will help you,’ ”** Isaiah 41:13.

If your answer is, “Yes, I believe,” then why should you go on being afraid? When you arrive home from church today, open your Bible to Isaiah 41:10-13; and in the margin beside these precious verses write: “December 9, 2018. By the grace and power of God, today is the day I stopped being afraid.”