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"DO NOT FEAR"

Isaiah 41:10-13

Perhaps the one thing more contagious than the coronavirus is the panic surrounding the coronavirus. Blind panic. Contagious panic. Panic that has gripped the world. Panic that has pummeled the stock market. Panic that has sparked panic-buying of disinfectants, cleansers, and sanitizers—emptying store shelves and leading to an avalanche of heartless price-gouging. One enterprising young boy in England was suspended from school for selling squirts of hand-sanitizer to worried classmates.

Admittedly, the news headlines are ominous and alarming. Restricted travel and gatherings. Closed businesses and schools. Quarantined nations and communities. Canceled sporting events. Conspiracy theories that the coronavirus is actually a biological weapon. And why such panic? According to an article in USA Today, the panic is due in part to a sense of powerlessness. Matters beyond human control. To quote from the article: "Psychologists and public health experts say public anxiety is high, and it's largely fueled by a feeling of helplessness."

Should we be concerned about the coronavirus? Yes, but within reason, within the proper context; remembering that, according to the *Centers for Disease Control*, an estimated 56,000 Americans die each year from seasonal influenza—the flu. Likewise, should we take precautions with the coronavirus? Of course, Follow the guidelines of the CDC and the medical professionals. Wash your hands frequently and thoroughly with soap and water. Avoid close contact in communities where the coronavirus has spread. Stay home if sick. Disinfect surfaces daily. Keep hands away from your mouth, nose, and eyes. Cover your mouth when you cough or sneeze All commonsense suggestions, many of which your mother taught you when you were a child. "Did you remember to wash your hands, Mark?"

But, as Christians, should we panic about the coronavirus or for that matter any other problem, circumstance, or condition in life. The biblical answer to that question is NO. Not just no, NEVER. In fact, the phrase **"do not fear"** or one like it occurs more than three hundred times in the Bible. Three hundred times. Clearly, God wants us to get the message.

One such reference to DO NOT FEAR is found in today's text, Isaiah 41:10-13, where God Himself declares: **"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. All who rage against you will surely be ashamed and**

disgraced; those who oppose you will be 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. 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."

Of course, not all fear is wrong. Hopefully, we all have a healthy fear of high-voltage power lines, intoxicated drivers, and the spinning blades of a power mower. However, a healthy fear becomes unhealthy when it consumes and controls us; when it fills our lives with despair, panic, and a dismal expectation of the Absolute Worst That Can Happen. This is the type of fear the Bible warns against. And the reason for the warning is clear. When our lives are characterized by terror and panic, we are acting as if we had no God; or at the least, as if the God we did have was weak, unloving, unreliable, and uninvolved.

Fear is an ugly thing. In many ways, living in fear is at odds with living by faith. Consider that storm on Lake Galilee when Jesus enabled Peter to walk on water. As long as Peter focused on Jesus and not on the frightening circumstances, he was fine. But the instant he shifted his gaze from Jesus to the white-capped waves and howling wind and pelting rain and peals of thunder, he began to sink; literally, to drown in water and drown in fear.

After snatching Peter to safety, Jesus did not ask him, "Why were you so afraid?" Instead, He said to Peter, **"You of little faith, why did you doubt?"** Do you see the correlation? Doubting God caused Peter to sink. Doubting God's power. Doubting God's love. Doubting God's willingness and faithfulness and resoluteness.

So, what do you fear today? Do you fear the coronavirus? Do you fear growing old, living alone, 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 worries are keeping you awake at night, robbing you of peace and sleep? In Isaiah 41:10-13 and many other Bible passages the Spirit of God reminds us why we should never live in panic or terror and how to find comfort when the world is in chaos.

First, remember to 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." "God, I'm afraid of this coronavirus pandemic." 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, remember that God is in control. God. Not the coronavirus. Not the U.S. government. Not the *Center for Disease Control*. Not the manufacturers of cleansers, disinfectants and hand-sanitizers. No, Almighty God is in control. And it's when we forget this great reality that we feel helpless. It's when we feel helpless that we panic. Paul wrote in Romans 8:31, **"If God is for us, who can be against us?"** Is the coronavirus somehow an exception to this biblical principle? The reality is, as the Lord Jesus said, **"Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows,"** Matthew 10:29-31.

Yes, all of us confess God's almighty power. "I believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth." How often do we say the words? How often do we live the words? Or do we rather make this confession, then leave church, then turn right or left on Highway 12, and find ourselves consumed with anxieties and worries before we even reach home? Or in my case, before I even make it across the church property to the parsonage.

Or consider our first reading for today, Psalm 46. Consider that in a setting of catastrophe, the earth removed, the mountains hurled into the depths of the sea—and it doesn't matter if the language is literal or figurative, an upheaval in nature or upheaval of heart—God turns to us and says: **"Be still, and know that I am God."** Be still. Calm down. Stop the worry and panic. Remember who is in charge here. I am. Not you.

Third, remember that God has not called you to live 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 for "power" in this verse, DUNAMIS, is the source of our English word DYNAMITE. The dynamite or power of the Holy Spirit working in us through the Word of God.

In a real sense, the phrase **"do not fear"** is the essence of the Gospel Message. On the night of the Savior's birth, the angel proclaimed: **"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 not to be afraid in every conceivable

situation, from the smallest tasks to the most hopeless circumstances.

For example, 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 the Savior told her grieving parents: **"Do not be afraid; just believe, and she will be healed,"** Luke 8:50.

Isaiah 41 was written at a time of great fear for the southern kingdom of Judah. The northern kingdom of Samaria had already been conquered and deported. Now, the Assyrians, led by ruthless King Sennacherib, threatened to do the same to Judah. In fact, according to Isaiah 36, emissaries of Sennacherib stood at the very gates of Jerusalem, taunting the Israelites: **"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, evil, and panic, God told 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 f these words sound familiar, it's likely because they are at least in part the source of our next hymn, LH #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."

Fourth, remember that God is with you. The same God who redeemed us through the priceless blood of His own Son. Admittedly, in times of troubled and crisis, we may wonder if this God is with us. But His solemn, unbreakable promises are these: **"Do not fear; for I am with you,"** Isaiah 41:10. And, **"Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you,"** Hebrews 13:5. And, **"Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age,"** Matthew 28:20.

And because God is with us, we 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? What? A world pandemic? A virus called COVID-19? 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.

Almighty God is not a part-time Savior or temporary helper. He doesn't clock in at 8:00 AM and leave promptly at 5:00 PM. Instead, He has said, "I am with you, so don't be afraid." And He has said, **"for I am *your* God,"** Isaiah 41:10. Your God. My God. Our God.

Fifth, remember that God is for you. "I am your God," He said. But how did He become your God? By choice, not by accident. 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 only Son, Jesus Christ, 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. Why, then, should you be afraid of anything?

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

Sixth, 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.

And 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" or "I can't stop worrying over this coronavirus thing"—clearly, there is entirely too much "I" and too little God. **"I will strengthen you,"** said God. I will. When or where did God ever ask us to find strength within ourselves?

Seventh and lastly, remember that you are saved. You are redeemed, restored, and forgiven in Jesus Christ,. You belong to God and you are His. You already own the gift of eternal life. Nothing can change that. Nothing can change God's love and purposes for you. Remember that Allstate Insurance Slogan? "You're in good hands with Allstate." Friends, you are in much better hands than that. You're in the hands of which Jesus said: **"My sheep listen to My voice. I know them, and they follow Me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of My hand,"** John 10:27-28. Hands of which God said in Isaiah 41: **"I will**

strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with My righteous right hand."

Christian friends, what have we learned today? No matter what, God is in control. No matter what, God will strengthen us. No matter what, God is with us, God is for us, and God will bring us safely from time to eternity.

Let me ask then: Do you believe what you heard 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 your sins? 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 to your problems that you could never have 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 you're answer is, "Yes, I believe," then why should you going on being afraid?