

# *Fear and Love*

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Matthew 6:24-34

Isaiah 49: 8-16a

Before I speak today, I want to ask the children who are here a question. I will actually have two questions for you today—one a little later—but, for now, here is the first question. When you think about the people you know, ***what are the things that make people you know worried or afraid?*** Now please don't give me the names of who it is you are talking about- just say what the afraid part is about. As we go through life, what are we afraid of? I will walk around a little, and you just speak up—I will repeat things back in the microphone so people can hear. (*Children share worries and fears*).

It is natural to worry and be fearful. We human beings have plenty to worry about.

The New Testament reading for today comes from the Sermon on the Mount, one of the most important collections we have of the teachings of Jesus. Right in the middle of these teachings, Jesus asks his followers not to be driven by fear and worry.

No one can serve two bosses, he tells them and us. We can't be preoccupied with fears about survival, or constantly worrying about making it big, and also serve God. We can't serve the power of Fear and also give ourselves fully to the cause of Love. At certain points in our lives we have to choose. We have to choose between existing in fear and living in Love. We have to choose between taking care of ourselves in an anxious way and looking out for our neighbors, for the good earth. We have to start living our lives on the basis of a vision of the way things can be rather than just what is.

Jesus knew it was natural to worry. So when he spoke to the crowd around him he reminded the people who were listening to him that there was a force more powerful than fear, a Spirit more real than the chaos and uncertainty that tends to grab us by the throat. Look at the birds of the air, he told them. They aren't in big business, they don't scatter seeds or harvest crops or stockpile their profits... but the One who made them takes care of them. Look at the flowers in the fields; they don't worry what they are going to wear. But God makes them more beautiful than King Solomon in all his splendor.

Jesus wasn't playing games. He well knew what we all know. Anyone who watches birds knows that birds suffer too. Anyone who looks closely at flowers understands that they burst into glory for just a little while. So what he WASN'T saying was that if we just quit worrying everything will be glorious forever. However he was saying that there is a Creator who made us and cares for us and gives us a purpose: a purpose bigger than we are. This God loves us more than we can imagine!

Jesus was picking up on the teaching of the 49<sup>th</sup> chapter of the book of Isaiah, whose writer was speaking to people who lived in exile, far from their homeland, in captivity. When the people felt like they had been forgotten by God, the prophet said: Can a mother forget her nursing baby? Even if a mother should forget to look out for her child, God is more mother than that! Look, says God—I've written you on the palms of my hands.

This is a good time to ask you children my second question: What are some of the ways you have learned, when you are worried, or afraid, to help feel more safe and brave? It's ok if you don't have any answers—I can always ask the youth and adults as well! ***What are some of the ways you have learned, when you are worried, or afraid, to help you feel more safe and brave?*** Take a moment to think about it—talk to the person next to you, both children and older folks. (*Children share ways of overcoming fear*).

There are two truths that emerge from our reading today. The **first** truth is this—none of us is exempt from fear or anxiety. If we are going to minister to others, we have to be honest about the condition of our own souls and minds and hearts. **We need to turn to the One who made us again and again, for comfort, for hope, for reassurance.**

And yet there is a **second truth** that goes with that first one. If we become totally focused on ourselves, if we don't look around at the situation of the larger world around us, we become narrower and narrower, more and more fearful. So the second truth is summed up in the final words near the conclusion of our reading from the Sermon on the Mount: "...**Strive first for the Kingdom of God, and God's righteousness (God's just path), and all these things will be given to you as well.**"

Truth the first: If we are going to minister to others, we need to turn to our Maker again and again for comfort, reassurance and hope.

Truth the second. We cannot afford to get stuck in our own selves, and lose sight of why we exist and what the big picture is around us. We need to strive for God's new creation, throw ourselves with abandon into the pilgrimage of Love.

It is not always easy to be honest about the condition of our own souls. As a member of the clergy, or a teacher, for example, one might feel like one is supposed to have the answers, when others are struggling with deep doubts and fears! But a little honesty can be a very healing thing.

I remember when my grandfather, then in his seventies, was dying, and I was in college. I went to see my religion professor. I asked him the hard questions, questions that in the end could be reduced to one word: WHY? Why should a good man have to suffer and die so slowly? Why should we have to lose a person who had helped so many? As I spoke, my teacher just listened. At the end, he looked a little shaken. "I wish I had good answers for you, Peter," he said. "But I don't. I have all the same questions. I'm not sure what to say."

I suppose some folk might have been upset not to get some answers from this well-trained theologian! But I was strangely relieved. I appreciated his honesty. And knowing that we shared the same doubts, the same struggles, I felt, well at least I felt a little less alone. I understood that sometimes the soul must simply live with fear and pain. And I felt *understood*, more than if he had offered up some glib answers. He seemed to know that some questions are too painful to have easy answers. At some level each soul must find its way to some answers—no one else can provide them for us.

As we look at the world around us, it is also important to be honest. My wife Lynn was reading the newspaper yesterday morning. "I'm looking for some good news," she said after half an hour or more. "I haven't found any yet."

I knew what she meant. Innocent protestors and onlookers being slaughtered in Libya. Teachers facing the possibility of losing what modest gains they have made in the upper Midwest. People dying in an earthquake in New Zealand. Where is the good news?

And yet, a little later in the day I came up with some good news, a little of it even from the pages of the same newspaper. In Libya, I found evidence of thousands of people who would rather die speaking out than live on in terrible fear and senseless oppression any more. In Wisconsin and elsewhere, I could see little people speaking out together, saying that we should treat our educators and public servants justly, and guard their right to a collective voice. In Christchurch, New Zealand, I read of a couple who have insisted with prophetic hopefulness on going ahead with their wedding, hours after pulling the bride out of the rubble.

All these could have surrendered to circumstance, given in to fear. But they have insisted on living as though there is a God who cares, as though there is a justice whose arc may be long and seem distant and yet bends toward a better future for all of us. They have risen up, refused to be held down by fear: old men and young women crying out for justice; children doing their bit to make the world a better place. "Strive first for the Kingdom of God and its righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

As we move now into a time of prayer, it is fitting that we bring all our fears, all our worries, here, to this communion table. We need to be honest about the state of our souls. And we need to dig deep to find the kind of revolutionary hopefulness to which the message of Jesus calls us. Your names—and mine—are all inscribed upon the palms of a God whose love is deeper and wider than we can imagine, a God whose justice will prevail, despite all of humanity's efforts to ignore it. Come. Let us turn once more to the one who made heaven and earth, who has inscribed you in the palms of God hands. Amen.