



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“Fear Not”

Isaiah 43:1-7

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Princeton Seminary President Craig Barnes tells a story about his family. His father was a preacher who believed it was important to memorize verses of the Bible. On Mondays he'd give Craig and his brother a verse written out on a little white card. They were expected to recite it from memory by dinner at the end of the week. He would point to them and say something like “Romans 8:28.” If they didn't start chirping away with “For all things work together for good for those who love God,” they would have to leave the table.

By the time they were teenagers, they had memorized a lot of the Bible, not out of love for the sacred text, but because they didn't want to be miss Saturday evening dinner.

When Craig was not quite seventeen, his parents' marriage broke apart. His mother left their home on Long Island and went to live with her sister in Dallas. His father left the church he had started and just disappeared. Craig's big brother dropped out of college, got a construction job, and helped Craig finish high school.

The following Christmas the brothers decided to go to Dallas to visit their mother. They didn't have money for a plane or bus ticket, so they decided to hitchhike from New York to Texas. That's over 1,500 miles. By the end of the first day, they were somewhere in the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia on Interstate 81. It was snowing hard and the sun was long gone. They stood on the entrance ramp with their thumbs sticking out. As the snow got heavier, there were fewer and fewer cars. (They learned later the highway had been closed because of the blizzard.) They were tired, cold and afraid. Very afraid.¹

This Sunday and next Sunday we are focusing on the topic of fear. We are going to spend some time examining our fears and exploring ways in which we might address them.

Fear is one of the most primitive parts of us and a very good survival mechanism. It is a repellent for dangerous situations, particularly helpful to our ancestors who lived in a world filled with actual predators—lions, tigers, bears. Fear, at its root, is a helpful thing.

These days, most of us are not threatened by literal lions and tigers and bears, but that doesn't mean that fear has gone away. Fear shapes our lives in ways obvious and hidden.

What do you fear? I've been asking people that question a lot the last few weeks and one of the things I have discovered is that our fears change as we age. As children, we are afraid of the dark. We fear being abandoned by our parents. We fear being chosen last. As teenagers, we fear being different, standing out, not belonging. As young adults, we fear not being heard. We fear disappointing others. We fear missing out. If we have children, our fears often center on them. In middle age, we fear falling behind our peers. We dread running out of time.

¹ <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/night-i-learned-take-chances>

A whole new set of worries emerge in our older years. We fear losing vision, losing mobility, losing ground mentally. We are particularly afraid of dementia and Alzheimer's. We fear becoming dependent on others, being a burden. We fear dying alone. At every age we fear loneliness.

Many of our fears center on things we can't control. Some of us fear being the passenger in the car. Some of us fear flying.

Our fears aren't necessarily related to actual danger. Many of us fear snakes, lizards, and spiders, although all three combined now kill only a dozen Americans a year.²

Here are some of my fears:

- running out of things to read
- getting the time wrong for a wedding or funeral. It hasn't happened. Yet.
- I fear losing the ability to read and write and understand and be moved by language
- I have an irrational fear of being strangled—I'm not a big fan of turtles

What are you afraid of? What do you fear?

The words from today's text are written to people who are afraid. The Israelites are in exile in Babylon, experiencing multiple layers of loss—loss of homeland, loss of identity, loss of hope. They fear that they will never go back home again. They fear they will lose touch with their faith, their history, their God.

Today's reading addresses those fears and then some. Isaiah is quoting God when he writes:

²Do not fear... when you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned... Do not fear, for I am with you.

Back to Craig Barnes' story. When we last saw the two brothers they were in Virginia standing by an interstate in a snowstorm trying to hitchhike to Texas. No cars are driving by. The two brothers do what they can to pass the time and keep their fear from overwhelming them. They quiz each other on sports statistics. Then Craig's brother points to him and says, "Romans 8:28." This is how Barnes remembers that experience:

We spent much of that night asking each other to recite the verses of the Bible we had memorized but never truly heard. At one point I found myself saying the precious lines of Isaiah 43: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you . . . Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you." By the time I finished reciting those words, I was crying.

Eventually a state trooper picked up the boys and took them to an all-night diner. They spent the night there, and then a trucker took them to Dallas. The experience stayed with Barnes. He writes:

That night, when a passage about the sustaining love of God cast out fear that was too deep for me to even acknowledge, became the turning point in my life. I've told this story before and keep telling

² <https://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/1201/prescol.html>

myself that it's all behind me now. I've been blessed to be in one position of leadership after another. But what I finally learned in hearing that text was that my experience has stayed with me every step of the way.

Barnes continues:

I don't keep taking chances in offering leadership because I expect to succeed; I take them because I know I can handle it if I fail. What's the worst that can happen? Will I be alone, broke, and abandoned? Been there. Will I make humiliating mistakes? I tried hitchhiking on a closed interstate. And at the bottom, I found the relentless love of God who was with me and always will be, no matter how deep the waters.³

Underneath our fears, beside our fears, amidst all that threatens us and frightens us is the relentless love of God.

A family story: We were camping in the Allegheny Mountains. We had been out hiking for the day and the sun had gone down by the time we drove back to our campsite. I was young—six or seven—and asleep in the back seat. The rest of my family got out of the car and carried the daypacks into the tent. My dad left the back seat car door open knowing he was coming back to scoop me up and carry me into the tent. As he headed back to the car he realized that we weren't alone. A bear had wandered into the campsite and was sitting on the picnic table. My dad stopped in his tracks. He didn't want to move and draw attention to himself or the open car door. He prayed that I would stay asleep. He stood there for what seemed like a really, really long time. And then the bear wandered away. My dad walked to the car, picked me up and carried me to the tent. I didn't find out about the bear until the next day. I slept through the whole thing.

God does not promise us a world without bears. Without snowstorms. Without floods. Without hurricanes. Without pain. Without disappointment. Without fear.

What God does promise is to be with us in all of it. Sometime standing off to one side. Sometimes scooping us up in God's strong arms. Sometimes carrying us and we don't even know it.

God says to us:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.

³ <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/night-i-learned-take-chances>