

“Fear NOT!”

Isaiah 41.10; 2 Timothy 1.7; Psalm 56.3-4; Isaiah 43.1-3; Psalm 27.1

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

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“Adam answered, ‘I heard you in the garden, and I was *afraid* because I was naked; so I hid.” (Genesis 3.10) “Sarah was *afraid*, so she lied and said, ‘I did not laugh.” (Genesis 18.15) “Abraham said, ‘She is my sister,’ because he was *afraid* to say, ‘She is my wife.” (Genesis 26.7) Jacob prayed to the Lord, “Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am *afraid* he will come and attack me.” (Genesis 32.11) “Moses was *afraid* and thought, ‘What I did must have become known.” (Exodus 2.14) “Samuel was *afraid* to tell Eli the vision.” (1 Samuel 3.15) “David took these words to heart and was very much *afraid* of Achish king of Gath.” (1 Samuel 21.12) “Elijah was *afraid* and ran for his life.” (1 Kings 19.3) “Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were *afraid*.” (Mark 16.8)

Let’s talk about *fear*. What I just shared with you is a *small fraction* of the hundreds – *thousands* – of verses in the Bible that relate to fear. Adam, Sarah, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Samuel, David, Elijah, the women at the tomb – *all* of those biblical figures, and countless more besides, felt *fear* grip their hearts. We all know what that feels like. Your amygdala kicks into action, sending warning signals to other parts of your brain. Your heart rate increases; your breathing rate increases; your peripheral blood vessels constrict; your muscles tense; your hair follicles contract. We’ve all *been* there, haven’t we? *We know what fear feels like*. It is a normal, natural emotion, affecting humans and animals alike. *There is nothing wrong with feeling afraid*. It’s *fear* that makes that squirrel run away from your fast-moving car. It’s *fear* that motivates you to teach your child to look both ways before entering a street. It’s *fear* that causes you to tread carefully when you are walking along a ridge and there’s a sharp drop to one side. Maybe you’re afraid of heights, or enclosed spaces. Maybe you’re afraid of snakes or spiders. Maybe you’re afraid of intimacy, or rejection, or failure. Maybe you’re afraid you’re going to lose your health, or your marriage, or your job. Maybe you’re afraid of having that important conversation with your parent, or your child, or your spouse. Fears are normal and natural. There’s nothing wrong with feeling afraid. The question is what we *do* with our fear.

I was at a church leadership conference for a couple days this past week. Participants were being invited to examine the state of their hearts, to explore the tender places in their souls that are in need of the healing mercies of Jesus Christ. Wednesday morning, four courageous men sat in front of the audience and shared their stories. One told about his feelings of complete inadequacy. Another talked about his battle with an addiction. A third shared his struggle with clinical depression. The fourth

talked about his divorce and his feelings of utter failure. Some of these leaders were clearly *afraid* to tell their stories. But they had agreed to do so because they knew that if *they* were willing to share the tender places in *their* hearts, *other* people would be better able to identify the tender places in their own hearts. The concept is simple: healthy leaders deal responsibly with their *stuff*. The stories were profoundly moving. There were tears. *Everyone* resonated with at least *one* of the stories. Some of these guys had been afraid – but when they mustered up courage to share, they *blessed* everyone there.

There are times when we're afraid of doing things that can *bless* other people. Things that can truly *help* other people, things that can bring *life* to other people. Things like ... sharing our faith.

A week and a half ago, several dozen of you stepped outside your comfort zone and joined in some conversations about evangelism. About sharing faith, about meeting people where they're at with the gospel of Jesus Christ. The conversations were *amazing*. There was openness and honesty and vulnerability and trust. There were penetrating insights, and a spirit of love and fellowship emerging in each conversation throughout the day. The reports I heard absolutely filled me with *joy*. It was truly a *wonderful* day in the life of this church. Some of you were eager for those conversations; some of you were afraid, *yet you came anyway*. I am *so proud* of those of you who participated. So incredibly proud.

We learned several very important things in those conversations. We gained some insights into *ourselves*, the members and friends of Mason First Presbyterian Church, and we now have a much better understanding why evangelism is difficult for us. The first important insight is that *we're afraid*. We're afraid of leaving our comfort zone, afraid of rejection, afraid of offending people. We're afraid that other people won't be receptive to the message, afraid of intruding on other people's beliefs, afraid of being vulnerable and having it thrown back at us, afraid of being uncomfortable, afraid of disclosing things and then being accused of hypocrisy, afraid that we might not be able to answer a question, especially if we don't have a strong foundation in the Bible. *We're afraid*.

Friends ... this is *beautiful*. This is *amazingly good*, that we can name it. And *immensely* helpful.

So we've got some fears. Some real fears that are getting in the way of us sharing faith with our neighbors, our friends, our co-workers, maybe even our family members. *A lot* of fears, actually – way more than I can tackle in one sermon. It's going to take weeks, or months, or maybe even years, before we've unpacked all this. Now we've got it on the table for discussion ... and that's a *good* place to start.

I shared with you earlier some snippets from the Bible about flesh-and-blood people, heroes of the faith, who felt their own share of fear. Adam, Abraham, Sarah, Jacob, Moses, Samuel, David, Elijah, the women at the tomb, and *so many more*. Friends, *you are in such good company!* The words "fear" and "afraid" are used more than five hundred times in the Bible. And the constant refrain we hear time and again is: *Fear NOT!* "Do not be afraid," says God to Abraham as he frets about not having an heir; "I am your shield" (Genesis 15.1). "Do not be afraid," says the angel to Hagar as she and her son waste away in the desert, "God has heard the boy's cries" (Genesis 21.17). "Do not be afraid," says Moses to the Israelites as they stand trapped between Egyptian chariots and the Sea of Reeds, "you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today" (Exodus 14.13). "Do not be afraid," says God to Joshua as he stands on the brink of the land of Canaan, "for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go"

(Joshua 1.9). “Do not be afraid,” says the angel to Joseph as he contemplates breaking his engagement with Mary, “because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1.20). “Do not be afraid,” says the angel to the shepherds watching their flocks by night, “I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people” (Luke 2.10). “Do not be afraid,” says Jesus to the women at the tomb; “tell my brothers to go to Galilee; they will see me there” (Matthew 28.10). “Do not be afraid,” says the risen Christ to the persecuted Christians in Smyrna, “I will give you life as your victor’s crown” (Revelation 2.10). God conveys this message again and again and again: “Do not be afraid!” “Fear NOT!” When people are following God’s will, and they are afraid, God says, “Fear NOT!”

So how do you do that? When you are following God’s will, and you’re afraid, how do you *fear NOT*? How did those leaders do it Wednesday morning? How did I do it here, last week, when I told you some of *my* story? It’s simple, really. There are only two necessary steps. The first: ask yourself this simple question: “Is God calling me to do this?” You’re going to have to pray about that. You’re going to have to ask God for clarity and direction. It may take some time before you are convinced, but if it really is God’s will, God will keep telling you, again and again, until you believe it yourself. Sharing our faith *is* God’s will. I have no doubt about that whatsoever. Some of you may not be convinced of that yet. I hope and I pray that, in time, you will come to see it as clearly and plainly as I do. Then, once you have clarity about God’s will, the second step is this: *you simply need to place your trust in God. He’s got you! He’s got this!* He had those men Wednesday morning. He had me last Sunday. He will have *you* when it’s *your* turn to share. That doesn’t mean it will be easy. But it *does* mean *it’ll be okay*.

I get a Bible verse on my phone every morning. Thursday morning the verse was Proverbs 29.25: “Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe.” I couldn’t have asked for a more perfectly-timed verse, on the heels of my revealing sermon last Sunday, and those four men sharing on Wednesday, and leading into this sermon today. That verse captures *everything* I’m talking about today. “Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe.” Friends, every time God calls us to do something, *we have a choice to make*. Are we going to be ruled by our fear of *other people*, or are we going to *trust in the Lord*? Fear, or trust – *which one of those do you want to live by?* When God says, “I’ve got a job I want you to do,” are you going to *chicken out* because you’re *afraid* – or are you going to *trust God*, and let Him give you the courage that you need?

There are times when we’ve all chickened out from doing what God was calling us to do. We’ve all been there. But the more we mature in Christ, the more we choose to *trust God* rather than *fear man*. There are times when God calls us to do something that *feels scary*. What I did here last Sunday – that felt scary to me. What those leaders did Wednesday morning – that felt scary to them. Now God is telling the members and friends of this congregation that we need to learn how to *share our faith* with the world around us. To many of you, that feels scary. *It’s okay to be scared!* But the question is, what are you going to *do* with your fear? Chicken out? Or place your trust in the Lord? Make no mistake, *every single person in this room has a important choice to make*. Are you going to *chicken out* because you’re *afraid* – or are you going to *place your trust in the Lord*, and let Him give you the courage that you need? Friends, we could *richly bless the whole city of Mason!* But only if we choose *trust over fear*....

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