

January 31, 2016
Jeremiah 1:4-10

Epiphany 4C
Don't Be Afraid

Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

In college I wrote a paper on phobias. In writing that paper I learned that people have many rational and irrational fears. In a google search on the top ten fears of Americans, I came across an article from 2009 from the Boston Globe. Seven years ago America's top fears were: Public Speaking, Snakes, Confined Spaces, Heights, Spiders, Tunnels and Bridges, Crowds, Public Transportation (especially airplanes), Storms, and Water (as in swimming and drowning). I guess four of my fears land in that list as well. Just last year in a survey conducted by Chapman Survey of American Fears, American's top ten fears are: Government Corruption, Cyber Terrorism, Corporate Tracking of Personal Data, Terrorist Attack, Government Tracking of Personal Data, Bio-warfare, Identity theft, economic collapse, running out of money, credit card fraud...further down the list include heights, insects, reptiles, and others.

You know, we are all afraid of something. Heights, Bridges, Airplanes, and Snakes would figure into my personal fears...along with more serious fears of my children wandering away from their faith. If each of us thought seriously enough we could come up with our own top ten list. We are all afraid of something...

In the Old Testament lesson for today, we hear the Call of Jeremiah. Jeremiah was chosen to be a prophet before he was even born into this world...he was chosen from the womb. Jeremiah is known to us as the weeping prophet. You will understand why in the message he had to share. He also wrote Lamentations. A book of Laments, a book of woes. Some Scholars believe Jeremiah was not quite 20 when he was Called by God to be a prophet. Other scholars believe he was even younger than that. Whatever the case was, he did not feel prepared for the task of being a prophet of God. The prophet records his words: ⁶ *Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth."*¹ Maybe he's afraid of public speaking or afraid that people won't listen to him for his age.

Throughout Jeremiah's prophetic ministry, He comes across to be a very gentle young man who is called by Yahweh God to speak some of the most critical and harsh statements from Yahweh God. They are not easy words to speak to other people. For example, in Jeremiah 19, there is an incident where Yahweh God tells Jeremiah to take some clay pottery and go to Valley of Hinnom, near one of the gates to the city, and smash it against the wall. He was to say this: *Thus says the Lord of hosts: So will I break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter's vessel, so that it can never be*

¹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version.* (2001). (Je 1:6). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

mended.² Jeremiah was the bringer of bad news quite frequently. You can image that if your job was to do precisely that, it would start to wear on you.

Think of various careers that are called on to give bad news to people...doctors, chaplains, pastors, police officers...

Perhaps some of these people have become numb to giving bad news to people...perhaps that's why some are bad at giving bad news. Did you also know that medical doctors have the highest suicide rate? Researchers have discovered that they must cause their patients pain in order to help them...that is not something that most people are equipped to handle. Yet in these professions they provide help and resources. Even as a First Responder they have told us if we have to be the bearer of bad news or have to work on a child or a called to a scene where the patient does not survive there are ways to deal with the work place traumas. Yet it can cause anxiety, and fear.

Fear, for most people, is a part of life. It's very much considered normal,

However, fear is really irrational for us as Christians. It's not just the fear that keeps us from doing normal, everyday tasks that is bad and unhelpful. Really any fear is irrational for the Christian.

I must admit that I'm overstating a little bit. You might be thinking to yourself...Pastor, what about my fear of snakes or wild animals or dangerous people? Isn't that fear to keep us safe? Then I'd ask, "Isn't there a distinction between fear and caution?"

Here's an analogy that I came across this past week, "Let's think of fear as the red light and caution as the yellow light. Think about that!! That is what fear does to us doesn't it. It prevents us from taking action. It causes us to stop! For example, if you come across a dangerous animal, you probably need to take some sort of action cautiously. Paralyzed with fear that causes inaction, could probably get us injured or even killed.

As Christians, we should not be afraid of anything. We know that God will protect us from the harm that He does not want to fall on us. We know that He will use the "harm" that does come our way to strengthen our faith. Perhaps He will use it to make us stronger or impact the lives of someone else.

I had a classmate at seminary that was diagnosed with cancer. Talk about fear implanting itself into a person. So many fears running through one's mind and the hearts and minds of family and friends. Matt was a compassionate and loved telling others about Jesus. He did so as a student, vicar, and pastor. He did so as a patient. When he was in various hospitals, he would share his faith. He was impacting the lives of others, doctors, nurses, and other patients. Was he afraid? I'm sure at times he was. He also lived his life knowing the One who saved His life and would grant him full

² *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2001). (Je 19:11). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

healing in both body and soul in the resurrection. Matt is now with the Lord and awaiting that resurrection.

Or we can take into account Jordan, he was a young man with Autism who faced a cancer diagnosis of his own. Jordan was a member of vicarage congregation. His parents were faced with fear every day, but they also faced each day with Christ as their guide. Fear never stopped them from loving their son and taking care of him. Even Jordan taught me to live life to its fullest as long as you live it fully for Christ. That's what he did. He impacted the lives of his doctors and nurses.

Fear...we've all been in fearful situations. Jeremiah is himself afraid. Jeremiah in his fear was giving excuses to Yahweh of why didn't want to be Yahweh's mouthpiece. You even have stories of Moses saying...I'm not good enough to speak. Perhaps Moses was afraid of Public speaking as well. Perhaps Moses was afraid to be Yahweh's mouthpiece.

Numerous times throughout scripture Yahweh or one of his angelic messengers tells His servants... "Do not be afraid." With fear being able to paralyze someone and to cause them to stop in their tracks, that happened all the time. The shepherd's, Mary, and Joseph to name a few. Jeremiah was there, stopped because of fear. Yahweh told Jeremiah: ⁸ *Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, declares the Lord.* ³ Yahweh told Jeremiah "Do not be afraid of the people...I'm going to be with you and deliver you." He even tells Jeremiah: "I'll even give you the words the say."

The Lord God has even appointed you to the vocation of disciple. He did that at your baptism. He has called you to go and share the message of the Gospel with those around you...even in the vocations that you serve on a daily basis...as parents, children, farmers, workers, etc. Yet, Satan does a good job to get us to fear what will happen when we share our faith, when we tell others about Jesus. Maybe it's fear that causes a church to talk about reaching out instead of actually reaching out. Maybe it's fear that causes a church to be inward focused instead of outward focused. It's fear that causes the church to cease being the church...by being the church I mean the Monday church as we live out our Christian lives in the world. It's fear that can cost people their lives when they stop. Fear can be very costly...when it comes to faith issues, it can cost someone their eternal life. When fear grabs you and causes to be inactive in your faith life...lives of your family, friends, neighbors, coworkers can be lost.

This week in our Gospel lesson there was no fear as Jesus continued to reveal himself to be the Divine Son of God in his healings and casting out demons. It was actually the demons that were fearful of Jesus...for they knew who He was, they knew what He could do. Jesus kept his eyes fixed on Jerusalem...especially after He comes down the Mount of Transfiguration, the Mount that we travel to next week.

³ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version.* (2001). (Je 1:8). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

So think of this...fear will grip you again...whether it be rational fear or irrational fear. Perhaps it will paralyze you as you are on top of a ladder or cause you to hyperventilate in an elevator or perhaps it causes you tears as you sit in the doctor's office hearing your test results or your heart skips a beat or two when the phone rings at 2 AM. It's going to happen...it seems like it's an almost natural reaction. Know this...when fear grips you the next time and keeps you from moving...whether it's one of those fears listed above or a fear of being ridiculed when telling others about Jesus; Jesus takes those fears and faces them for you and with you. Jesus knew he had a task to do for you.

He didn't turn and run from the task at hand. He kept his eyes focused. Instead of being gripped with fear that led to inaction, Jesus kept moving. He kept moving towards Jerusalem, when it was His time. He didn't cower in fear from His adversaries. He kept doing what He was born to do. When He was in the courtroom being lied about, He didn't beg for his life. He didn't beg for his life as He was being whipped, scourged, beaten, spit upon, stripped, crowned with thorns, and bloodied. He wasn't paralyzed with fear when he was forced to carry his cross or when His hands and feet were nailed to the tree.

In fact, He went willingly for you. Instead, from the cross He prayed for those that rejected Him that they might be saved. He cried, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." He never allowed to fear to prevent Him from accomplishing His mission.

And since He accomplished His mission for you...you can accomplish yours as well. He has given you the words to speak when and where He pleases...just as He promised Jeremiah. He has given you the freedom to act, to speak, to do His will...to go where He leads you.

He promises to be with you, even when you are afraid. And when fear grips you, He will speak those compassionate words, "Do not be afraid, I am with you!"

In Jesus Name. Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding guard your hearts and your minds and keep them focused in Christ Jesus, our Lord and Savior. Amen.