

## FEAR GOD

“Do not be afraid of them,” Jesus said. Those words jumped out at me when I read them in preparation for this sermon. Especially the word “afraid.” Are you ever afraid? I am.

Mostly I’m afraid about the future; about what’s going to happen to my family, my friends, our nation and our world in the years to come if humankind continues on the perilous path it seems determined to go down.

I’m afraid that ignorance, apathy and denial will prevent us from doing the things that need to be done to save our planet from rising sea levels and a deteriorating, dirtier environment.

I’m afraid that health care is going to more and more become, not something all people can and should have access to, but a luxury that only the wealthy will be able to afford.

I’m afraid that a Pandora’s Box has been opened, and an epidemic of hatred and bigotry and destructive anger has been released that we may never be able to get back under control—if they were ever under control in the first place.

I’m afraid that the gap between the wealthy and the poor is going to grow to the point that desperate people will be moved to take desperate measures—up to and including violent force—in order to make things fairer and more equitable, because the system seems to be rigged against them and doesn’t care about them.

I’m afraid the priorities of our political leaders have gotten all messed up and corrupted, and they’re working, not for the best interests of our nation and its citizens but their own self-interests.

I’m afraid that automatic weapons are too easily getting in the hands of the wrong people, common sense gun regulations won’t get passed, and the slaughter of innocent children and men and women will go on and on and on.

I’m afraid that our fear of terrorists and suspicion toward foreigners and immigrants, that racism and sexism and elitism and other kinds of prejudices, will bring out the coarsest, most vile instincts in us in the name of safety and survival, and the teachings of our Lord about caring for the least of these and showing mercy and compassion and loving God and one another will all go right

out the window.

The kinds of fears I just listed aren't the fears Jesus was addressing, but nevertheless, his words can and do speak to us: "Do not be afraid."

Of course, that directive of Jesus raises a question in my mind. Is it actually possible to not be afraid? I ask that question because the reality is, our fears are justified. We have a legitimate excuse to feel anxiety and trepidation, for the reasons I mentioned earlier and many other reasons, as well.

So maybe what Jesus was trying to teach us, what Jesus wants us to do, is put our fears in perspective. I don't believe Jesus was saying there's no reason for us to fear. I think what he was saying was, there's something greater and more significant to fear than the things we're afraid of now. In other words, maybe we're afraid of the wrong thing.

"Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell." In other words, if you must fear something, fear God! Fear the Almighty, the One who created you from the dust of the earth and can utterly destroy you, if God chose to do so.

You see, the things we tend to be afraid of are things that are able to cause us physical harm and bring about our death. We fear the things that can "kill the body," as Jesus put it.

I think what Jesus was trying to say is, "What we tend to be so afraid of is merely the expiration of our flesh and blood selves, the end of our mortal existence. But that's only physical death, and there is something far worse and more to be feared than mortal death. And that is, spiritual death.

". . . be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell," said Jesus. In other words, the only person, thing or circumstance we should truly be afraid of is God.

Now, let me say at this point that, as a pastor I'm not a fan of fear-mongering and using scare tactics to bring people to God. But that's not to say God isn't worthy and deserving of our fear. Fear, you see, is just an extreme form of respect, honor and reverence. And God deserves our deepest, strongest respect, honor and reverence.

This is a very common biblical concept. You can find passages about "fearing" the Lord throughout the Scriptures. Take this passage in Psalm 112: "Praise the LORD! How blessed is the person who fears the LORD, who greatly delights in His commandments." And this passage in Proverbs 19: "The fear of the LORD leads to life, so that one may sleep satisfied, untouched by evil." And you'll find this statement in Ecclesiastes 8:12-13: "Although a sinner does evil a hundred times and may lengthen his life, still I know that it will be well for

those who fear God, who fear Him openly.”

So, Jesus was simply aligning himself with two thousand-plus years of Jewish thought regarding fearing God. And what our Lord was saying was, our honor, respect and reverence for God can and should supersede anything else we’re afraid of.

My interpretation of what Jesus is saying to us today is, whatever we’re afraid of: be it terrorists, a worsening environment, climate change, running out of money, corrupt government, unwise or illogical leaders, nuclear annihilation, growing old and feeble, becoming seriously ill or disabled, the death of a loved one, our own impending death, or fill in the blank with your own personal fear—whatever it is we’re afraid of, said Jesus, put it in perspective. Because the worst that can happen is that our mortal life will be over. But as much as we may fear the death of our body, there’s something else that should be of much greater concern to us: the death of our soul. Compared with that, the death of our body is nothing to be afraid of.

I want to conclude this morning’s message with a couple of brief stories. The first is an experience a man named John Alexander had while he and his wife were taking a mule ride along the Grand Canyon. Alexander wrote:

“Given that the slip of a hoof could have led to a fall a quarter of a mile straight down, that the mules were as stubborn and uncooperative as mules are said to be, that it was early spring with ice still on the trail, and that the Grand Canyon is wondrous . . . well, let’s just say we developed a serious respect for the Grand Canyon.

“Our respect increased when [my wife] Judy’s mule bent over and began to munch on some brush three feet below the trail. The mule’s back, with Judy on it, pointed down at a forty-five degree angle straight toward the bottom. “By then, that element of fear was entrenched, and mixed with wonder.

“The Grand Canyon isn’t designed for ease of human use, but as a display of the grandeur of God and God’s creation. It’s the kind of place that should strike us speechless and give us a sense of our smallness and creatureliness. [The Grand Canyon] is the kind of place that can return us to reality after the shallow existence we accept as normal living . . . The kind of place where you can easily experience joy and peace—and easily get killed.

“As a friend said about Canada’s Banff National Park: ‘You shouldn’t mess around with whoever made that.’”

No, you shouldn’t mess around with whoever made that. Instead, the Lord, who made Banff National Park and the Grand Canyon, should be greatly respected. Honored. Revered. And feared above all else. But along with that fear of the Lord we can experience something else—something a minister

named R. Maurice Boyd from the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City touched on in a sermon he gave entitled, “The Uncertain Harvest.”

Dr. Boreham was a great Australian preacher. One weekend he preached in a church and was the guest in the home of one of its members. Coming downstairs in the morning he noticed that on the landing window these words were carved: “This is the day that the Lord hath made. We will rejoice and be happy in it.”

When he went to breakfast he said to his hostess, “I was very interested in the words inscribed on the window landing. It’s an unusual window. How did it come about?” She replied that she was once overwhelmed by a sense of failure that reached her out of the past, and by a sense of fear as she contemplated the future, and every waking moment was a torment. So one day she decided to let the Bible fall open and take the first text her eye fell upon as a message from God.

Let me say at this point that I am not recommending this as a method of Bible Study. I heard of one man who did the same thing and the first text he saw was, “Judas went out and hanged himself.” After such an unpromising start he thought he would try again, so he allowed it to fall open once more and the text he saw was, “Go and do likewise.”

This woman’s Bible, however, opened at the words, “This is the day that the Lord has made. I will rejoice and be glad in it.” She said, “It was for me light in a dark place. It saved my life. I discovered that the past could be forgiven; that I could enter the future with grace; that God had given me this present moment of blessed opportunity.”

So, my friends, there are two messages from our Lord that I pray you will take away with you this morning. The first is, whatever worldly fear that might be frightening you and robbing you of peace in this mortal life, Jesus said, “Do not be afraid.” But if you just can’t help yourself and must be afraid of something, then switch fears and fear the Lord who gave you your body and your soul in the first place, and could destroy them if God chose to do so. Which, fortunately, God chooses to do very, very infrequently, and only under the most extreme circumstances. So, let us place our fear, our respect, our honor, our reverence and our faith, in Almighty God. Because when we do, as it says in the book of Proverbs, “The fear of the LORD leads to life, so that one may sleep satisfied, untouched by evil.”

And the second thing I hope you will take home with you this morning is, yes, God is able to destroy our body and our soul in hell, just as Jesus said, but it’s not God’s will to do that.

There’s a huge difference between God being able to destroy our body

and soul, and wanting to do that. Our God is a God of life. A God of love. A God of peace. A God of joy. A God of mercy. A God of grace.

Our God is awesome enough to have made the Grand Canyon, and that's a God you don't want to mess around with.

But our God is also the God who made the mule that is able to navigate the Grand Canyon with steady, secure steps, and carry us on its back so that today and every day we can rejoice and be glad for the glorious grandeur of God's creation. That's the God I choose place my faith in, no matter how bad the world seems to be and how afraid I am.

Thanks be to God. Amen.