

“Choose Faith Over Fear”

Isaiah 12:2-6

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This morning our attention is drawn to one of the most unique passages in Isaiah. In a book not known for brevity, this chapter is short by any measure, only six verses.

Beyond this, the entire chapter is composed of either one song with two verses or two songs that have been blended to form a beautiful thanksgiving hymn. I am confident this hymn of gratitude and praise was sung in worship much like those found in the Psalter.

This song, like all our hymns, has a powerful message for us today. What would that be? Faith is stronger than fear, and faith is available to all people.

This is certainly good news because we live in a culture of fear. There is no shortage of anxiety in our nation and world, and our own community is not exempt.

All of us clutched our children and grandchildren a little tighter last week because of what happened to a six-year-old child in Versailles Sunday night while he was sleeping in his bed. Senseless tragedies like this and frequent occurrences of mass shootings in our world feed our fears, which lie just below the surface like a shallow root.

What anxieties and fears have you brought into this sanctuary today? What keeps you awake at night and distracts you during the day? Is it...

...the protection of your children

...the security of your job during this time of transition in state government

...the lack of money you need to pay your bills

...a fear of running out of money before you die

...the results of your latest medical tests

...the instability of your marriage

...the inability to know how to respond to the abuse you are enduring

...the finals you must take as you wind down the semester

...the pressure you feel to perform in the classroom, on the ballfield or at the recital

...the possibility of becoming a victim of a mass shooting or terrorist attack

What does fear do to us, even if the source of that fear is real and valid? Fear makes us weak and vulnerable to those who wish to manipulate and control us. This is one reason people use fear to get us to do what they want.

How many times has a victim of abuse told me she stayed in a dangerous situation because the fear of making a change was greater than the fear of staying? Often we succumb to an abuser's rhetoric and influence and let them do our thinking for us. Gradually, we accept beliefs and behaviors that are contrary to what we know to be healthy and best for us and those around us.

Fear robs us of joy, even at Christmas time. Just because we lit the candle of joy this morning on the Advent wreath, it doesn't mean everyone is joyful. People sinking under the heavy weight of persistent worries struggle to see any reason to celebrate.

I understand. In my opinion, the greatest enemy of joy is fear. It is impossible to be afraid and happy at the same time. Fear is this dominant and powerful because it contributes to feelings of inferiority, despair and hopelessness.

Now, let me quickly state there is such a thing as healthy fear. We don't touch hot stoves or walk in front of cars because of fear, and this is good.

The fear I am referring to this morning is an unhealthy fear, the kind addressed by the prophets, along with Jesus and his disciples.

It is a fear which intimidates us and causes us to pass up opportunities to grow and mature and achieve our potential.

It is a fear that prevents us from opening our lives to new visions and possibilities.

It is a fear that makes us doubt ourselves and settle for less than our best.

It is a destructive fear that influences us to believe the worst in others and brings out the worst in us.

It is a fear that speaks the language of self-preservation and selfishness.

It is a fear that hardens our hearts and makes us callous neighbors.

It is a fear that drives us away from God and others as we build walls of suspicion and hate.

What can we do about this? How can we confront our fears and keep them from controlling us? We can do what Isaiah did.

“Surely, God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The Lord, the Lord, is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation. With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.” (Isaiah 12:2-3)

What did Isaiah do? He made a conscious decision to listen to his faith and not his fears. And what did his faith tell him?

He served a God who knew him personally, cared deeply about his welfare and was always near. He could rely upon God to walk with him along his journey providing wisdom, understanding, strength, courage, stamina, determination, will-power, confidence, patience and guidance.

Isaiah knew when doubts arose and fears assaulted him, God would be there to travel with him down unfamiliar roads. He would never take one step alone, even on a precarious journey. He could count on God to still his heart and put steel in his spine.

In addition, Isaiah knew when bad things happened to him, as they had and would again, God would be there to help him heal and move forward. Evil and discouragement would never have the final words in his life. God would, and those words would be filled with mercy, compassion, companionship, hope, peace and joy, which would lead to liberation from all his fears.

Isaiah was confident God would never abandon him in his darkest hours, but draw even closer to his side, like any loving parent. This is why God became the source of Isaiah's strength, protection and deliverance, and why Isaiah listened to his faith more than his fears.

No wonder the second verse or poem was added to this song.

“Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known among the nations what he has done, and proclaim that his name is exalted. Sing to the Lord for he has done glorious things. Let this be known to all the world. Shout aloud and sing for joy, people of Zion, for great is the Holy One of Israel among you.” (Isaiah 12:4-6)

On this third Sunday in Advent, this is my challenge to you. Choose faith over fear. Open your heart and life to God and trust God to guide you. When you are faced with a daunting challenge this week and the voices of faith and fear compete for your attention, choose to listen to your faith.

I am certain you will be glad you did.