

Things Change

Isaiah 44:6-8

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I looked through a bunch of old sermons this week. Searching on the computer makes it easy to find what I'm looking for. Usually. I had in my mind that I had preached about fear several times. And indeed I had. As recently as last summer. And several years ago, I preached about fear using Franklin Roosevelt's famous "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." I've been pretty consistent with what I've said about fear over the years. I like being consistent. What I've consistently said is "Don't be afraid." The Bible tells us this a whole bunch of times. Some people say the Bible says this 365 times, once for each day of the year, but I did not stop to verify that statistic. It sounds a little too tidy to be true to me. But it's true that the Bible itself has a consistent message: don't be afraid. God says it. Prophets say it. Angels say it. Jesus says it. Don't be afraid.

But this year, these last several months, "don't be afraid" hasn't proven to be a very good message. "Don't be afraid" has led people to take too many risks, to be reckless with their own health and others' well-being, and to make selfish decisions. "Don't be afraid" has become, for some people, "it's silly to be afraid."

A long time ago, when I was a youth minister, I learned that having a little fear could be a good thing. I had taken a group of youth on a ski trip, which appeals to teenagers because the danger gives us a rush of adrenaline, and it's just plain fun. On this trip, if I'm remembering right, most everyone had been skiing before and was more or less comfortable skiing within their skill range. Except one kid. He had never been before. I made him take lessons, which he quit at lunchtime on the first day. He had no fear. None at all. He would start at the top of the mountain and go straight down, heedless of his own safety, and everyone else's safety too. I fussed at him. Repeatedly. He promised me, each and every time, that he would be more careful. Maybe he thought he was, but it sure didn't look like it. Sure enough, on one run straight down the mountain, he got over balanced and fell down. His hand holding the ski pole went straight into his tummy, hard. Knocked the wind out of him, but did not knock any sense into him. He got right back up and did it again. Thankfully, we made it home with that kid in one piece, but it's not because he ever learned anything. Zero fear is not a good idea either. But "Be afraid, be very afraid" is not the message we need to preach, either, since it's the opposite of Scripture's consistent message.

This short passage from Isaiah is just one of the "don't be afraid"s in Scripture. It is written and intended to be a comfort to the people who were in exile, doubting their God because of their disheartening and discouraging circumstances. It's a reminder of who God is, and that they belong to God, and therefore they should not be afraid.

It's a word from Isaiah, but he is simply passing on what God has told him to say. And what God has told him to say is a broad and strong description of who God is. God is the first and the last, the god of all that is, the king of Israel even though Israel is in exile, the God who knows both the past and what is to come, the rock that holds them steady. Since *this* is the God to whom they belong, it is obvious that they have no reason to be afraid.

We belong to that same God. So it must be obvious that we have no reason to be afraid. But it isn't so obvious. There's a lot of space between "it's silly to be afraid" and "be afraid, be very afraid." There's plenty of space to be cautious, to be respectful, to care for our own health and the health of our neighbors. There's plenty of space to be reverent and respectful and in awe of God, or as the Biblical writers phrase that, to fear God.

Fear can rule over us, so that all we can think of is all the many good and verifiable reasons we have to be afraid. And all those reasons may indeed be good and reasonable, but when all we can do is think about how afraid we are, then we do need to hear "don't be afraid." God never ever says "it's silly to be afraid." And here God reminds us why it is we don't need to be afraid, don't need to be wrapped up and held captive by our fear: it's not because of who we are; it's not because of the situation that we face; it's only and always because of who God is.

I'm sure you've heard by now of the death of Congressman John Lewis on Friday night. He was a living icon of the Civil Rights Movement. I've seen lots of quotes from him, but one of my preacher friends posted this one, and I thought it was especially appropriate for this sermon.

*"When I was young and something was going wrong I would have an executive session with myself and I would say: "John Robert, listen — The Lord is my light, and my salvation; He is the strength of my life. Whom shall I fear?" (Psalm 27) And that stayed with me. Even when I was being beaten, trampled by horses, facing the tear gas. When we were on the bridge I really thought I saw death, but I felt that the presence of the Almighty was with me, and was surrounding me and we survived."*

John Lewis could say to himself "don't be afraid" for the same reason Isaiah told the exiles, and for the same reason we can say it: because we belong to God, and God is the beginning and the end, the strength that upholds us, our past, our present, and our future. It is in God that we live and move and have our being, and we can be not afraid.