

Do Not Be Afraid
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
June 28, 2009
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture: Isaiah 41:8-13
1 John 4:1-8

I have heard from many of you that I missed a special worship service last week. I want to thank our friends Ray and Martha Kiely for posing the idea that Lucy preach here. The choir was at its usual best. Then, to top it off, I understand Lucy came down from the pulpit and sang a captivating song at the piano that capped off a wonderful Sunday morning.

I wasn't back in the office long on Monday before the first person asked me the question: Well, John, why can't *you* play the piano and sing? And, while we are on the subject, can you do *anything* musically at all?

I will have you know that today I brought my kazoo and, a little later on, I will be leading us in the Gloria. Sorry, that's all I've got.

If I asked you to name the opposite of faith, what would you say?

Many might immediately say the opposite of faith is doubt or some other sort of non-belief. As you might have noticed, the bookstore shelves these days have more than their usual number of books about atheism, which is the belief there is no God, as well as agnosticism, which is the belief that we can never know whether there is any kind of supreme being.

In this age of such deep and profound uncertainty, the debate between believers and non-believers has heated up, especially in the past year. It's nothing new in history, this swell of doubt in difficult times.

Others of you might have thought about other words as the opposite of faith. Perhaps you thought of idolatry – the misplaced belief in ourselves, our things, our jobs as that which is most important in our lives, even more important than our faith and our God.

I would offer that the opposite of faith is fear in all its forms.

Last week, we launched another new thing here at Caldwell – the summer sermon grab-bag, and I want to thank those of you who have already tossed in some very good ideas. I hope to stick with the grab bag for most of the summer so I hope the rest of you will give some thought to what you might like me to consider as I put aside the lectionary, which is the weekly guide to scripture passages used by preachers throughout the church.

The topic that comes out of the grab bag for this week is fear. Specifically, the repetition throughout scripture of the phrase “Do not be afraid.” One person counted them up and concluded there are 365 instances of that phrase and others like it – one for every day of the year it seems. Another commentator said “do not fear” is the most oft-repeated command in the Bible.

“It sounds simple,” wrote one member on the card he or she put in the grab-bag, “but HOW as Christians and especially as humans do we accomplish that state of mind? Why did God give us emotions and then tell us not to respond to situations with them, including our worries and our fears?”

Those are some excellent questions! There is a local radio personality who likes to say that he has the smartest audience of them all. I could say, without hesitation, that I have the most thoughtful congregation of them all.

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We should start with a quick look at all the ways that words for “fear” appear in scripture, because its variations can tell us about faith – ours and the characters of scripture – as well as about God.

In the Old Testament, four out of five references to fear relate to God and they have a fairly consistent meaning. In Genesis, for example, to fear God is to feel a sense of awe toward God and there is often some trembling that goes along with it. In other books, hair stands on end, bones shake and hearts pound. Many of these references convey a sense of God’s “otherness,” the mystery and power that surround God. They are framed by an understanding by the patriarchs that no one could survive even seeing the face of God, before, of course, God had a face in Jesus Christ.

But in both testaments, other references to fear are a bit more familiar, a bit more human, even if the circumstances aren’t. Shepherds in the field get a fright when angels appear. The disciples at sea get scared, as we all would, when an unexpected storm tosses their small boat. These references remind us that the characters of scripture were often just plain people with the same emotions and reactions as you and me.

In all of scripture, the phrase “do not fear” appears most often – and always with the same meaning – in the prophecy of Isaiah. Six times the prophet tells the exiled nation of Israel that it should put its fears aside. Sequence is important in Isaiah. These six references come in the second set of writings, after several admonitions in the first set of writings from Isaiah that Israel should fear God for abandoning God. The message for

us, perhaps, is that God expects our devotion and failure to revere God and live for God does have consequences.

But in the second set of writings from Isaiah, which make up the latter half of his prophecy, the time of punishment for Israel is over. Israel has been exiled from its homeland. It has suffered for its sins. Now, through Isaiah, God reminds Israel that it is still God's chosen nation, that God stands by God's promises even when we do not.

"Be strong, do not fear." (Is. 35:4)

"Do not fear, for I am with you." (Is.41:10)

"Fear not, for I have redeemed you." (43:1)

"You will have nothing to fear." (54:14)

It is a message of restoration, the restoration that, with God, always comes after and overcomes whatever punishment we are due.

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But, our grab-bag writer might ask, that still doesn't answer the question about why God gives us the emotion of fear in all its forms and then tells us to "fear not."

Reasons to fear abound, to say the least. Each of us has our own human frailties – those deep-seated anxieties about where our lives our going, our yearning to see the big-picture, to know how the story ends, to know that we will be all right, that our families will be all right and that we are living lives that have at least some redemptive qualities. These questions are always with us.

Then we can add on the effects of our times. If there is one word that would serve as a label for 2009, it has to be the word "uncertainty." The global financial system has been largely unraveled. Major system failures have given us clear evidence that we did not have a handle on the global economy.

Now the effects are coming downstream. The economy hasn't been this frail since World War II. Millions are jobless and the dominoes keep falling.

Here in Charlotte, the United Way has slashed funding for dozens of social service organizations. Quoting one non-profit leader in Charlotte, the Observer's page-one headline blared "We're in crisis."

I can think of no better word to describe the decision the United Way faced when it had to choose to focus the deepest cuts on non-profit agencies serving children, senior citizens and the disabled ... all in an effort to preserve monies for provide clothing, food and shelter for those living on the borders of existence in this recession. Our city is

literally functioning like a triage unit, trying to make impossible decisions about who will suffer less. The city's churches, including this one, are moving to fill the gap, but we can only do so much.

I won't go into the threat from North Korea, the ever-present danger of terrorism, the dying of our planet, the massive national debt. So, given all of this, our member might ask, how can we feel anything but fear?

Last week, I had breakfast with a friend who spent his entire career building a highly successful business. But he found himself and his business in the crosshairs of the real estate depression and earlier this year, he was forced to do the unimaginable –filing bankruptcy both personally and for his business. On the cusp of retirement, he and his wife are starting over.

He is a man of deep intellect, spirituality and faith and I asked him how he had coped, what he had learned from it all. His response was quick and certain: He said he could not imagine going through this terrible time without faith. It's not that he hadn't experienced the full range of emotions – guilt for letting down his investors, his employees and his family, helplessness in the face of a global meltdown that torpedoed his business, questions about why such a thing had to happen, loneliness and more.

But through it all, somehow, he had become closer to God. His losses had left him exposed, vulnerable, stripped of the distractions that can separate us from God. All he had left, practically, was the love of his family, the support of his friends, whatever abilities he had to hang on ... and his faith.

Sure, there were plenty of days when the words "fear not" didn't help much, days when he was making his own triage decisions hour by hour, what bills to pay, which ones would have to go unpaid, which employees to lay off one week verses the next.

But through it all, he knew God's promise of redemption would win the day. Through it all, he had plenty of fears, sure. But his faith, a gift of God, won out. It reassured him that God's promise in God name, "I am," would redeem and restore him, as a person, a disciple, a husband and friend if not as the CEO of a major company.

Reflecting on all of this over eggs and bacon, he cited Romans, chapter 5, which says that our suffering leads to endurance which leads to character which leads to hope. I asked him where he was on that journey. Again he answered with no hesitation. He has hope, he said.

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In the chapters that immediately follow today's reading from Isaiah, the prophet recognizes that Israel in exile is cowering, uncertain of its future. So Isaiah asks the people of Israel a pointed if not also unusual question.

“Do you feel like a lowly worm?”

Well, how about it? Do you sometimes feel like a worm? Do you feel like a small, slow-moving, insignificant insect just trying not to get stepped on or snatched up by a sharp-eyed robin?

I know I do, sometimes.

But Isaiah says only a few lines later that God sees us more as powerful instruments of God’s will, able to level mountains and tame hills into soil where God sews great things. I will transform you from an insect into iron, God says through Isaiah.

The psalmist says in Psalm 139 that we are “fearfully and wonderfully made.” I read that to mean that while God has given his a range of emotions to enrich our lives, including fear, we are not to become mere vessels of fear, captive of our insecurities. Instead, by living into and out of our faith, a promise of God, we each are made to do wonderful, amazing, marvelous things.

This transformational love of God is the perfect love that can cast out fear, as the author of 1 John wrote in our New Testament text.

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Neda Agha-Soltan was the 26-year old daughter of Iranian parents, one of three children in a middle-class family. Her friends described her as happy, serene and spiritual with a quirky sense of humor.

She had taken an interest in human rights of late. So when the protests over the recent Iranian elections broke out, she was drawn with a friend to get out on the streets to witness first-hand what was emerging as an historic moment for her troubled and divided country.

By all accounts Neda was just standing there watching the protests when she was hit in the chest by a bullet. Someone with a phone camera captured her dying moments there in the street. Within hours, the images were circulating the globe via the internet and Neda had become a martyr, an international symbol of all that is wrong with tyranny as well as a symbol of the irrepressible hope of those who want a better future for their country and the world.

As she breathed her last, her friend knelt by her side and pleaded with her by name: “Neda, do not be afraid, do not be afraid.”

Neda was a Muslim. We don’t know exactly what her friend meant by his efforts to comfort her. We do know that Neda’s name, translated in Farsi, means “divine calling.”

And while it would be easy to over-read this episode, surely we can agree that we worship a God, and we pray that Neda knew a God, whose promise is that we need not fear.

And perhaps that can be a divine calling for each of us, to live, even in the face of our fears, as those who know that our faith wins out.

To God be the Glory, Amen.