

Fear Not!
Isaiah 43:1-7

Last Christmas, a 23 year-old Nigerian man who claimed to have ties to Al-Qaida attempted to destroy a Detroit-bound airliner, and fortunately was stopped by a passenger on the plane. Everybody who heard this news was frightened and insecure. We fear the existence of Al-Qaida, which has threatened the nation's security. In some sense, we are living in a time of insecurity and anxiety.

Today's scripture, Isaiah 43:1-2, tells us, "Fear not, for I have redeemed you. I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze."

Do you have fears now? How much do you fear for the present? I would like to reflect on this scripture lesson and rethink the nature of fear. Let us listen again to the words, "fear not" and reaffirm our relationship with God who tell us, "Fear not."

First of all, what is fear? Fear might be defined as an inner feeling of apprehension, uneasiness, concern, worry, and/or dread, which is accompanied by heightened physical anxiety. It can arise in reaction to some specific, identifiable danger, or it can come in response to an imaginary or unknown danger.

Why do we feel fear and what do we fear? What is the nature of the fear that we are facing? There are three kinds of fear: the first is objective fears. When we confront with dangerous objects, we fear those, be they enemies, beasts of prey, or disasters. When we fear, our natural instinct is to escape the situation or to fight the object to defeat it. After 9/11, the government decided to fight Al-Qaida and its leader, Osama Bin Laden. This is an example of an objective fear we face.

There is another kind of fear, which may be called "existing fears." These fears are hidden in ourselves. Like a fear of loneliness, fear of losing a job, fear of failure or misfortune, or rejection. Fear of our sins or hidden secrets being exposed. Fear of losing mom is the greatest fear that my grandson Benjamin knows, experienced when mom isn't in his sight for some time. All these fears are existing fears. People are afraid of failure, the future, achieving success, rejection, intimacy, conflict, meaningless in life. These may be called existential fears.

There is, however, even another kind of fear, which I will call "ontological fear," that relates our destiny, experienced during illness or in contemplation of death. Heidegger, a German philosopher, called the human being as a "Thrown Being." When a baby is born, the baby starts his or her life with a cry because the baby feels fear. This fear, we call ontological fear. These are invisible objects, hidden in the depth of being, which are seeds of our fear.

When we read Genesis Chapter three, we discover the fear that Adam had. Right after they, Adam and his wife, ate the forbidden fruit, their eyes were opened, and they realized they were naked. So, they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. And, the Lord God called to Adam, “Where are you?” He answered, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid.” This is the ontological fear that we feel when we are discovered in our guilt.

Let us hear again the words of God, “fear not” in our life. Sometimes we are over fearful, sunk in unrealistic fear. “You don’t have to fear!” the Bible tells us.

Most of the fears we have, we need not fear. I heard this story from a Korean preacher of his experience a long time ago. One evening, he decided to go up to a mountain to spend the whole night praying by himself. The spot he chose in the mountains was a desolate place, and there was no one nearby. It was about ten o’clock on a summer evening when he started to pray, and he did so loudly so that he should hear his own echo to ease a creeping sense of fear. When he opened his eyes, he saw a white ghost approaching him from a far, so he shouted,

“Go away ghost! In the name of Jesus I command you!” Then, the white ghost moved away. After a few minutes, he opened his eyes again and found the same ghost approaching him. So, he shouted again, in the name of Jesus, and again the white ghost moved slowly away. After a few minutes, again, he opened his eyes and he found the same white ghost approaching him in the same distance. So, he shouted again, louder than before, in the name of Jesus. So the white ghost moved away and came back again, and the whole night he spent wrestling in this manner with the white ghost.

However, when the sun rose at last, he realized that the white ghost was not in fact a ghost, but a white wet bed sheet, hanging on a branch of a tree to dry. As the wind blew, the white sheet had slowly moved back and forth while he was shouting. Like this man, we sometimes fear unnecessarily.

I read a book, *The Seven Laws of the Learner*, written by Bruce Wilkinson. In his book, he shared his story. Bruce Wilkinson once had an opportunity to speak in front of a large audience many years ago. His heart was racing, knees shaking, palms sweating, and he was frantically praying that maybe God could help him. There was a famous speaker sitting next him. While they were singing the hymn before speaking, Bruce Wilkinson spoke to the next person, “I’m so nervous! I don’t know if I can do this.” Without batting an eye, this great man said, “Bruce, don’t be so proud and self-conscious.” “You are so concerned about yourself and how you will do and what the people will think about you – that’s why you are nervous.”

Rick Warren said that we fear because we are so focused on ourselves and to please others rather than God. When you don’t know whom you’re trying to please, you cave in to three things: criticism (because you are concerned about what others will think of you), competition (because you worry about whether somebody else is getting ahead of you), and conflict (because you’re threatened when anyone disagrees with you). These three things; criticism, competition and conflict made us fear unnecessarily.

If I “seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,” then all the other necessary things of life will be added unto me. (Matthew 6:33) This means that if I focus on pleasing God, it will simplify my life. I will always be doing the right thing – the thing that pleases God – regardless of what anybody else thinks.

Lastly, let’s reaffirm our faith in God who says, “Fear not.” So, we have three kinds of fear, objective fear of enemies, existential fear, fear of meaninglessness, and ontological fear, which is rooted in the guilt and condemnation in our life. All these fears arise from trying to be independent from our Ground of Being, the Creator, our Lord God.

When I was a little boy, there were many bad boys around me who threatened to beat me up because I didn’t play with them. They hated me. But, whenever I went out, either my father or big brothers walked with me, and even in the darkest night, I had no fear at all because I was not alone. But, after getting older and being independent, becoming a responsible adult, I have had fear more and more, and bigger and bigger fears.

“Know thyself” is a famous line from Socrates, an ancient Greek philosopher. Knowing oneself is a very important, basic, fundamental knowledge. The first principle for handling stress in life is this: Know who you are. If you don’t know who you are, you will subconsciously let other people manipulate you and pressure you into believing you are somebody you aren’t. A lot of stress in life results from our hiding behind masks, living double lives, being unreal with others, or trying to be somebody we’re not.

One day Jesus healed a demon-possessed man near Galilee, a remote village. For a long time, this man had not worn clothes or lived in a house, but had lived in the tombs. When he saw Jesus, he cried out and fell at his feet, shouting at the top of his voice, “What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, don’t torture me!” Jesus asked him, “What is your name?” “Legion,” he replied, because many demons had gone into him. He belonged to a band of demons.

Jesus commanded the evil spirit to come out of the man. When the demons had gone out from the man, he dressed and became right in his mind. This man had lost his identity and had become a man of demons, belonging to a group of demons.

I know who I am by knowing whose I am. I am a child of God. I was put on earth not by accident, but for a purpose. I am deeply loved by God. I am accepted by him. He has a plan for my life, and because he put me here, I am significant.

When we are in front of God we are supposed to be children of God. We are His children. Know yourself, whose you are. Isaiah reminded us, “I have summoned you by name; you are mine.” If we knew truly whose we were, we would not be afraid of anything. God will take care of me!

There is a Korean proverb which says, “Arms tend to bend inward.” This means that ultimately, people favor their own (families), and prioritize them over others. When a disaster, like fire or flood, occurs, everybody worries first for their family members. I do

pray, occasionally, for others but I pray more earnestly for my family and church members. That “Arms tend to bend inward” is a natural and normal reaction. You are mine, so I will care for you first.

Do you know that I pray for everything, but in all honesty, I pray first for my relations, church members, friends, and their families and neighbors arms do “tend to bend inward.” God, too, may care first for His children when danger occurs in the world. The Lord says, “He who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel; Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine.”

In this, we find ontological peace. Whenever we, who are branches, are connected to the true vine, The Christ our Lord, we will not be afraid of anything. (John 15) There is no fear in love. “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.” (1John 4:18) Find God’s love in you and depend you life on God’s love.

There is a prayer for serenity, made famous by Reinhold Niebuhr, a notable theologian. He prays,

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference. Living one day at a time; enjoying one moment at a time; accepting hardship as the pathway to peace; taking, as He did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it; trusting that He will make all things right if I surrender to His Will; that I may be reasonably happy in this life and supremely happy with Him forever in the next.