

Do Not Be Afraid

Texts: Genesis 21:8-21

Romans 6:1b-11 (Series A. 3rd Sunday after Pentecost 2020) Ps.86:1-10, 16-17

Matthew 10:24-39

Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather be afraid of God, who can destroy both body and soul in hell. For only a penny you can buy two sparrows, yet not one sparrow falls to the ground without your Father's consent. As for you, even the hairs of your head have all been counted. So do not be afraid; you are worth much more than many sparrows!

Let us pray:

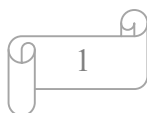
A Lutheran pastor, by the name of Martin Niemoeller, was on Adolf Hitler's list of people he feared and hated the most. To keep him quiet, Niemoeller was put in prison. Months later, he was summoned before a special court, and suddenly he began to feel afraid. He had no idea what to expect! And, as he was taken along the seemingly endless corridor from the prison cell to the courtroom, he heard a low voice.

As he listened, the voice was quoting from the Bible in Latin, the version used by the German Roman Catholic Church. The voice whispered a verse from the Book of Proverbs. It began, "***Nomen Domini turris fortissima***" "*The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe*" (Proverbs 18:10). It was the prison guard's voice. We don't know who he was but what he said had an instant impact on Pastor Niemoeller – his fear vanished and his confidence in God was renewed.

That's what Jesus is telling his disciples in today's reading from Matthew's Gospel. Jesus has been giving his disciples instructions prior to their first mission. He told them about all of the dangers and hardships that they may have to contend with as they announce that the Kingdom of God is near and as they heal the sick and raise the dead. Just as Jesus faced opposition and suffered, it will be no different for those whom he sends out.

He says, "People will betray you, hand you over to the authorities who want to kill you. Everyone will hate you because you are my disciples" "*A disciple is not greater than his teacher. If the world gives me a bad time, it will give you a bad time, too*" (Matt 10:21-23).

If Jesus was here this morning, and he sent us out with these warnings, what thoughts would be racing through our minds? Perhaps something like this: "On my! It's all I can do to get to church on Sundays. And here we're supposed to be shouting the Word of God from the rooftops? No way. I'll give this one a miss, if you don't mind, Jesus."



No doubt, Jesus is sending his disciples like sheep into the middle of a pack of wolves (Matt 10:16). So what does Jesus do? Sell them life insurance? Give them a quick course in martial arts and self-defense? Teach them how to diffuse the anger of their opponents by winning debates? No, instead he urges them to *trust* God. Confidently go ahead and speak the truth. Shout it out. Stand and deliver (Matt 10:26,27).

“Do not be afraid...,” he says. “For only a penny you can buy two sparrows, yet not one sparrow falls to the ground without your Father’s consent. As for you, even the hairs of your head have all been counted. So, do not be afraid; you are worth much more than many sparrows!” (Matt 10:29-31).

Sparrows are very common birds, very small and insignificant creatures, worth very little; yet, they matter to God, according to Jesus. People may regard them as worth nothing but, as far as God is concerned, they are extremely valuable.

When you have had your hair cut, has the hairdresser ever asked, "Did you know that hair number 487 has a split end?" Or, when you notice in your comb that one or two hairs have separated from your head, do you go into mourning over the fact that you have two fewer hairs on your head?

A hair is such a small, insignificant thing – no one takes any notice when one drops out. But Jesus says that every hair on our head is numbered. He says that God is vitally interested in hair number 487, even though I, myself, consider it too trivial to worry about. Jesus wants to get across the idea that it doesn’t matter what is happening in our life, God has an intimate knowledge of every detail that happens to us.

Isn't that amazing? God knows everything that we go through, and nothing that happens to us escapes him. When we feel lonely and totally abandoned, when it seems that our prayers are unanswered, when everything seems hopeless, God knows, and God cares. Jesus concluded saying, *“So do not be afraid; you are worth much more than many sparrows!”*

My father was an exporter of hardwood such as Teak, Mahogany, and Ebony. As a little boy, my father took me along to one of his job sites, in the rain forest, to inspect a tree being cut, where one could find trees as tall as 500 or 600 feet and between 6 to 8 feet in diameter at the base. We drove as far as we could drive on the dirt road and parked the Land-rover. We walked for about 2 miles through mud, creeks, rocks, hopping over dead trees etc.

Periodically, we walked in shaded areas where we could not see the sun - dark and very spooky. The croaking of the frogs, the chirping of the crickets, funny sounds of different birds, and the shadows of the trees frightened me. I asked my father if there was any danger of something catching us, like a big lion, but he assured me that there was nothing to fear. And so, taking me by the hand, he said, *'Nothing will harm us.'* Immediately, my fears subsided.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created such paranoia among some people, including Christians, and my conversations with some of these people has been to defuse their fear by reminding them of two things: firstly, doing our part by following the protocol set by the public health department of Quebec (wearing masks in public, social distancing, washing hands) and, secondly, reminding them of God's love for us and our faith in God to sustain us during this pandemic.

Fear is one of the emotions that God placed within us to keep us humble, I think. My mother used to say: "Fear is a **thief**; it will steal your today, make you dread your tomorrows. But our God is the God of your yesterday, today and tomorrow."

Like a father who will do anything to protect his child, God watches over us. Like a father who is ready to hold our hand when trouble strikes, Jesus assures us that we are precious, and he is ready to comfort us when we are afraid. What it boils down to is that the perfect antidote for fear is trust in God.

That's the experience that pastor Niemoeller had as he was being taken down the corridor of a Nazi prison to an indefinite future. The unknown guard whispered *"The name of the Lord is a strong tower"* ("**Nomen Domini turris fortissima**") reminding him that God knows his situation, and God will give him the strength to face whatever the future may hold for him. His fear vanished. The Bible resounds with messages about faith in God in a time of trouble.

- ❖ **The Lord is my light and my salvation; I will fear no one. The Lord protects me from all danger; I will never be afraid.** (Psalm 27:1,2)
- ❖ **God is our shelter and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble. So we will not be afraid...** (Psalm 46:1,2)
- ❖ **Whoever goes to the Lord for safety, whoever remains under the protection of the Almighty, can say to him, "You are my defender and protector. You are my God; in you I trust."** (Psalm 91:1,2)

We can say that this was the experience of Jesus as he faced the horror of the cross. He went to the Garden of Gethsemane and prayed. Jesus had feelings like any other human. He asked the Father that if there was some other way to save all people, to take away all the suffering and pain that lay ahead. As we know, the ordeal of the cross didn't go away but we are told that Jesus was strengthened (Luke 22:43).

We know that most of the disciples faced all kinds of horrors to the point of losing their lives. I'm sure that Jesus' words must have had a powerful effect on them, as they suffered for their faith. It must have been a great comfort to know that they were not suffering alone in some dark and dingy prison cell – their heavenly Father knew exactly where they were and what was happening. If he knows all about a hair that falls from our head, or small ordinary birds, then how much more does he know about the children whom he loves?

- ❖ Sometimes we are afraid that we will make a wrong decision.
- ❖ Sometimes we are afraid of what others will think when we speak up for Jesus.
- ❖ Sometimes we are afraid of what the future will bring our children. We are afraid of getting older.

Whatever trouble or crisis is affecting your life, what a joy it is to know that God knows your troubles better than you even know yourselves. Even when you think that your troubles are too insignificant, compared to those of others, be assured that your heavenly Father knows exactly what is happening. Or, even when you think that no one else cares, it's good to know that God cares. What a release from fear it is to know that God is on our side, that our life is in the hands of a loving God, and he will make sure that everything happens according to his loving plan for us.

Let me conclude with this - the next time fear takes a grip on your life, take a moment to recall some of the great promises of God. Remind yourself that God cares – you are a dear child of his, and he cares for you. Do not be afraid.

“Fear is a thief; it will steal your today, make you dread your tomorrows.

But our God is the God of your yesterday, today and tomorrow”

"Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows." "Trust in the Lord.

Have faith, *do not be afraid*, do not despair. Trust in the Lord.

God in Christ is with us" Amen.

HAPPY FATHER DAY

June 21, 2020

