

One of the most common sayings in the Bible is God telling his people not to be afraid. God said to Abraham, **“Do not be afraid. You are mine and I am yours. I will be your shield.”** The hymn “A mighty fortress is our God” is based on Psalm 46 which says, **“The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.”** **“Do not be afraid.”**

This is a powerful message because fear is powerful. Think of the most unequal of human relationships, the relationship between a master and a slave. Why does the slave put up with the arrangement that requires him to do all the work while all of the benefits go to the master? It's fear. The master has the ability to punish. The master can take away whatever little creature comforts the slave enjoys. The master can whip or beat. The master can kill. Fear keeps the slave under control. Fear is a very powerful tool.

Thankfully our nation eventually said “no” to slavery. A civil war had to be fought, but on the other end of it the majority said that this human relation is unacceptable. However, that does not mean that fear ceased to be a powerful factor in human relationships.

For example, fathers and mothers can terrorize their children through punishment so that children learn never to cross mom or dad. This can sound like it's the fourth commandment, **“Honor your father and your mother,”** but it is not. Fathers and mothers should punish their children when they have done something wrong. That's their job. But fathers and mothers should not punish their children because their children disagree with them, to make their own life easier, or to exert such control over them that they learn to be afraid to ever displease them. Strictly speaking, godly children should fear no one but God alone. They should be afraid of falling into sin. Authority, when it is being used rightly, helps us to fear God.

Fearing God is not bad for us. It is good for us. There are a lot of Bible passages along these lines. The Bible says many times: **“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”** That's like saying, “If you don't fear the Lord, then you don't even know your A B Cs.” “If you think that you can do whatever you want and get away with it, then you are extremely foolish.”

Jesus says in Matthew chapter 10: **“Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”** Jesus is not talking about the devil there. He's talking about God. God's perfect judgment is what renders the verdict of heaven or hell, and Jesus tells us to fear him instead of fearing anyone else. It's like saying, “You can't make a monkey out of God.” You can fool people, but you can't fool him. Although authorities can punish, they are nothing compared to God. This, in fact, opens up a new and radical way of looking at the world.

The Lutheran pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, once said in a sermon: “Those who are still afraid of men have no fear of God, and those who have fear of God have ceased to be afraid of men.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran pastor in Nazi Germany who opposed Hitler. Some of you perhaps remember him from a class we did last fall. Eventually, because of his opposition to Nazi authorities, Bonhoeffer was arrested, put into a concentration camp, and executed according to Hitler's explicit orders just weeks before the end of the war. Jesus's words literally applied to him, **“Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.”** The Nazis killed his body; they could not kill his soul.

Listen again to what Bonhoeffer said: "Those who are still afraid of men have no fear of God, and those who have fear of God have ceased to be afraid of men." You can detect freedom in those words. God is yours and you are his. Your obedience is ultimately not owed to anyone except him. If something is wrong, then it's wrong no matter who does it and no matter what any authority might say about it.

Of course, authorities are notorious for trying to get their way. Therefore, they might punish you. They might yell at you. They might fire you. They might put you in a concentration camp. They might kill you. None of that takes away your freedom. That is a divine and royal prerogative that God bestows upon his children. Freedom is intrinsically good! As Paul says, "**For freedom Christ has set you free!**"

But, as the saying goes, "Freedom isn't free." Freedom isn't easy. Submitting to the yoke of slavery is easy, because then the masters will quit punishing you. It would have been much easier for Dietrich Bonhoeffer to keep his mouth shut. The Nazis would have left him alone. Literally tens of thousands of Lutheran pastors chose that very path, and guess what? They survived the war! Bonhoeffer did not. But what seemed prudent for those who submitted to evil because they were afraid of being punished was, in fact, not prudent at all because it was idolatry. Bonhoeffer's actions, which were arguable reckless, were not only prudent, they were glorious.

Every single one of us as Christians is called to a life of freedom. Every single one of us is called to a life of glory. Fear is all around us. I have my fears. You have your fears. These fears can be debilitating, but they don't have to be. No fear is invincible because God exists and he does stuff!

This past week I was learning together with our 5th and 6th graders about the freed slaves being led to the shores of the Red Sea. God led them into a trap. The sea was in front of them; the world's most powerful army was behind them. They had no hope. They were going to die. But Moses preached God's Word: "**Do not be afraid. Stand firm. Just watch and see how God will save you.**" And he did! He opened up the Red Sea so completely and utterly that they walked through its depths on dry ground.

In our Gospel reading today Jesus talks about something even more severe. He talked about how Jerusalem would be destroyed. As Jesus tends to do, this talk also got mixed up with the end of the world. At the end of the world the sun and the moon and the stars will go wobbly. These utterly predictable forces will cease to be predictable along with other strange events. What could be stranger than seeing the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory?

What always impresses me, though, is what Jesus tells us to do. He says, "**When these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.**" You know the posture of fear: Shoulders hunched, head down, eyes averted. Jesus says, "Don't be like that." Even though the world is literally falling apart, "Straighten up, lift up your heads, and look up, because Jesus's salvation is coming to its glorious completion. You are about to be redeemed to an entirely different existence. Do not be afraid. If anything, be excited!"

This theme of "Do not be afraid," seems fitting to me as we look ahead to our respective futures. You do not need me. You need Jesus, and you have him. When you were baptized Jesus said, "I am yours and you are mine. We belong together." Believe that. Pastors are only supposed to help. What is really

important is not the pastor, but your faith. The Bible says, **“This is what has overcome the world, our faith.”**

This is why the church does not collapse as pastors come and go. The church is not built on pastors. It is built on faith in Jesus. He is resurrected, lives, and reigns from the right hand of God the Father. He is Lord. The church’s future is Jesus’s future. Each congregation’s future is Jesus’s future, as the Holy Spirit works through the Word. God is at work here, and he will continue to be.

As everything we’ve talked about today has shown, though, when God says, **“Do not be afraid,”** that does not mean that nothing frightening will ever happen. It doesn’t mean that the things that threaten us are not real. They are. Very real Nazis killed Bonhoeffer. Very real Nazis killed him, and yet they couldn’t kill him. They killed his body; they could not kill his soul. How noble! He defied evil! This is the freedom and glory that all of us have been called into. No one can take these divine and royal prerogatives away. We only lose them by refusing to pluck up our courage to exercise them.

Therefore, I will conclude with what Paul says in our Epistle reading as he is saying farewell to the Thessalonians. He says: **“The Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one.”** Be established. Be guarded by the Lord. Do not be afraid.

