

# *Ascension Lutheran Church*

*Pastor Godkin's Sermon for the week of July 26, 2009*

## Don't Be Afraid! (Luke 12:4-7)

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Our text is from the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke:

"I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him. Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. 7Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows."

This is the text.

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, when I looked up the word, "fear" in the Oxford Dictionary it gave this definition: "An unpleasant emotion caused by the threat of danger, pain, or harm." It is difficult to find a good purpose for fears. Fears can weigh us down and swallow us up. But honestly speaking how many of us have fears? All of us I think.

Researchers at Johns Hopkins University said that 30 years ago, the greatest fears of grade school children were: 1) Animals, 2) Being in a dark room, 3) High places, 4) Strangers, 5) Loud noises. Today, kids are afraid of the following: 1) Divorce, 2) Nuclear war, 3) Cancer, 4) Pollution, 5) Being mugged.

The Bible deals with this issue of fear as well. In fact, the word "fear" or "afraid" is mentioned over 100 times in the New Testament alone involving people just like you and me. Fear is a problem that has plagued man all through history and in the Bible we see that God wants to cure this plague. Over and over He says, "Don't be afraid". To Abraham God said, "'Do not be afraid...I am your shield, your very great reward.'" To his son Isaac God said, "Do not be afraid, for I am with you; I will bless you and will increase the number of your descendants". Moses gave God's message to Israel, "He will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged." God gave this same message of assurance to Joshua, Moses' successor, to David and on down through the prophets as they spoke to the people.

Then at the time of Christ's birth we see the angel comfort Joseph – "Don't be afraid to take Mary home as your wife". To Mary the angel said, "Don't be afraid, you have found favour with God." To the shepherds who watched their flock the angel said again, "Don't be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people." And the same message is brought to the disciples in the boat in our Gospel reading where Jesus says, "Take courage, it is I; Don't be afraid".

The Bible seems to be full of scared and vulnerable people much like the world today. But God responds in the same way as He did in those days. He says, "I am with you. Don't be afraid".

The problem is we have a tendency to forget this when times get rough. Confusion sets in and we start to lose focus of the One who has pledged to never leave us. Two explorers were on a jungle safari when suddenly a ferocious lion jumped in front of them. "Keep calm" the first explorer whispered. "Remember what we read in that book on wild animals? If you stand perfectly still and look the lion in the eye, he will turn and run." "Sure," replied his companion. "You've read the book, and I've read the book. But has the lion read the book?"

But fears are no laughing matter are they...When we worry, we make our troubles double. Instead, our Lord invites us to trust in Him and cast our anxieties on Him because He cares for us. Jesus has come to deliver us from worry, anxiety and fear. Ironically this deliverance comes when we fear the Lord.

Now if you have ever wondered what it means to 'fear the Lord' you are not alone. In our text, Jesus tells His disciples not to fear those who can kill the body but to rather fear the One who can kill the body and soul in hell. These are harrowing words. The mere mention of hell sends chills up our spine. It is the place that we deserve for our sins. And yet Jesus encourages us not to be afraid of Him. He says, "The very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows."

God encourages us to trust in Him and to fear Him at the same time. Is this a contradiction? No. To fear God means to give Him our deepest reverence and loyalty. To have utmost respect for God and to have His Word take first place in our lives is what it means to fear Him. In a sense to fear God means to fear the consequences of being separated from Him. If a small child is lost in the shopping mall he feels alone and afraid. In the same way, fearing God involves staying close to Him and keeping His Words of instruction. In short, to fear God involves clinging to Christ even when it is unpopular with others.

It is a loving reverence for Him that includes submission to His lordship and belief in His grace and promises. To fear God means to put all our efforts into walking in obedience to the Lord and looking to Christ for grace and mercy along the way. To fear God means to hold His Word as the most important Word in our lives, to cherish it above all things and have it as our ultimate guide in life.

Jesus invites us to have no fears with Him. With Him even the worst thing in the world cannot harm our soul or our salvation. The disciples were sent out as missionaries to the four corners of the globe and their lives ahead would be tough. Jesus said they would be persecuted for His sake and that they would even be put to death. The same is true for the church today. In this post-modern society, where people reject the idea of there being one universal truth or only one way to heaven, the Gospel message is not welcome by many. And this means that being a Christian is not going to win us any

popularity contests. Nevertheless, when difficulties or persecutions or even if martyrdom should come our way, we can be sure we are still under the Father's loving care.

Friends, probably the greatest fear of a Christian who is suffering for the sake of Christ is that God has abandoned them. We have a human tendency to think that God allows suffering and even death because He has forsaken us. But the truth is we have no reason to fear abandonment from God because His Word is true and sure. Jesus gives a sweet promise. He says, "Do not fear, you are worth more than many sparrows." He will never forget His suffering ones. Your testimony to Christ in this world brings glory to God the Father. Along the path of this life He will strengthen you through the power of the Holy Spirit to confess Jesus as Lord and He will preserve us unto life everlasting. May He turn our timidity to boldness so we echo the words of St. Paul in Romans 1, "I am not ashamed of the Gospel for it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes."

In his first inaugural address in 1933 president Franklin D. Roosevelt delivered his famous line, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself". Fear can be self-perpetuating. Fears can snowball in our minds but they don't have to. God gives us relief from this plague. St. Paul wrote in Romans 8, "If God is for us who can be against us?" Jesus has redeemed us by His blood; He has Baptized us and made us His own, and He feeds us with His body and blood to preserve our life in Him. He will not leave us or forsake us.

To fear the Lord is to have Him near; it is to cling to Christ. And with the Lord at your side the fears of this life lose all power. Jesus has overcome the worst things of this world by His death and resurrection and with Him we also may overcome.

Friends, to fear the Lord is a good thing. It doesn't have to send chills up our spine. It means to walk in reverence and awe of our God and Lord; to have utmost respect and loyalty to Him and most of all to fear the Lord means to cling to the life and forgiveness and grace we have in Christ Jesus.

As Luther wrote in the third stanza of his hymn, A Mighty Fortress Is Our God:

"And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us,

We will not fear, for God has willed His truth, to triumph through us."

Indeed, with Christ, we have the One who banishes all fears. He says, "Take courage, it is I; don't be afraid!" Amen. The peace of God that surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.