

Sunday, August 25, 2019

Rev. Robert W. Brown

SERMON

Fear Not!

INTRODUCTION

If you were at last week's worship you may remember we talked about faith. I said that faith is more about trusting that whatever comes, whatever the specific outcome of your prayer is, God always comes to the rescue. Faith is trusting that God has knit together a greater plan, and in the end, God always redeems everything. Faith is more like faithfulness; it is an active way of being.

Building on that idea, we will look today at a Scripture from the Prophet Jeremiah. This reading is from chapter one. Like most all Bible characters, and most of us, Jeremiah began as a reluctant prophet. Yet he ended up living a truly a remarkable life that became an extraordinary collection of writings. His 40-year ministry was a tremendous display of faithfulness in action and courage in the face of great discouragement, opposition, and small results.

God called him as a prophet to the nations. Even though Jeremiah's focus was upon Judah in the last decades before the Babylonians conquered it, his work as a prophet was not only for Judah, but also for the nations – and for us today. Hear this reading that begins the journey of the Prophet Jeremiah...

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Now the word of the Lord came to me saying,

“Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you,
and before you were born, I consecrated you;
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

Then I said,

“Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.”

But the Lord said to me,

“Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’;
for you shall go to all to whom I send you,
and you shall speak whatever I command you.
Do not be afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you,
says the Lord.”

Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth;
and the Lord said to me,

“Now I have put my words in your mouth.
See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,
to pluck up and to pull down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant.”

Prayer:

*Maker of all our courage and giver of ultimate peace, may the words of my mouth
and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing to you, our Rock and our
Redeemer. Amen*

“What would you want to do if it were your last day on earth?”

That old chestnut comes up at least once a year in the Youth Discussion Group. I remember pondering that question in great depth when it was posed to me when I was 15 years old. It really is a good jump start to imagining your own mortality and zoning in on what your true priorities are in this life. But we really don't live our daily lives that way. I guess it's not really even possible. Maybe the better question is, 'in a world in which your choices might very well end with your death, do you believe the choices you make enough to stake your life on them? That is a heavy way to live!'

In the United States today we are beginning to experience what other people in our world have already learned for generations; there really is no guarantee of safety. On any day, life may end for any one of us. Every day, multiple times a day, we operate two-tons of metal and plastic, hurling at one another at staggering speeds. More and more it seems that ordinary activities of daily life will find us in places where a shooting might occur. Places like schools, malls, concerts and workplaces. It is no wonder that clinicians report that fear and anxiety is among the fastest growing epidemic facing our society.

How do you cope with this kind of anticipatory, generalized fear? Some experts say awareness of your own fears is one way to go and also, to do things that are soothing and comforting. Things that will distract you. Do things that bring meaning to your life and bring comfort to other people.¹ And that all sounds reasonable, but I'm not sure that is truly living the fullness that God intends for all people. We cannot just "stay busy" if our lives do not have value to us; busy nonsense may distract us for a moment, but it does

¹ *Fear in the Air, Americans Look Over Their Shoulders* New York Times

not calm the storm of existential terror. And, as tempting as it may seem, we cannot simply stay in bed and pull the covers up over our heads.

I'll bet the whole ranch that Jeremiah wanted to do just that. He squirms with God to NOT be a Prophet. People really hate it when you hold up an accurate, unvarnished reflection and that is exactly what Prophets prophesy and Jeremiah knew that.

Not unlike the days of Jeremiah, these are dark days in America, we are surrounded by random violence wielded by the armed and angry, while most of our elected officials continue to display a dreadful cowardice when it comes to legislating effective and meaningful change. Our choice to live as we would like and be safe is not now, if it ever was, available to us. Most of us have no direct part in what makes the gunmen angry, but we may be victims anyway.

Your life as you live it, with all of its many commitments, expectations and desires, requires us to walk into a world of random violence. So, the question really is, do you believe in what you are doing today, enough to say "I may be cut down before I can finish, but I am building a meaningful life day by day".

People suffer and sometimes die, sometimes because of choices they have made and sometimes as a result of another's whim. Today, we need to be aware that our lives are made valuable by our conscious choices, and that we truly have faith that our lives matter.

This takes some high-octane courage! If you want to preserve your life, I suppose you could stay in bed and pull the covers up over your head, circle the wagons and keep your head down. I've heard it said that dogs don't bark at parked cars. But, like young Jeremiah, this is not the life God is calling us too. And Jeremiah was no fool. He knew that as soon as he stepped on the accelerator of preaching God's word, that terrifying, aggressive barking would begin. He would be criticized, mocked and persecuted. He was all that and much more! It's worth the read.

So how can we prepare ourselves? Simple. Read and learn from these ancient stories. Imitate the men and women of faith. They were not as different in their fears and anxieties as you might think we are today. Follow in the Way of Jesus and abide frequently in the presence of Christ. Meditate on his grace and dispense grace yourself with abandon. Ponder his extraordinary love and actually mimic that love. Memorize Scripture. Talk to God. Courage comes as we live with Jesus.

Not many of us consider ourselves prophets, but here is the truth of it. Your very existence is one of the never to be repeated ways that God has chosen to reveal the very existence of God in space and time. We are God's reflection here and now. Like it or not, we are made in God's image and likeness, you and I are yet another promise that God has made to the universe. So, we go - Jeremiahs of the world - to all to whom we are sent. We

speaking and living this Good News of the Gospel, and we are not alone, and we are not afraid, for we know, that God will always be with us and will always deliver us.

We go “to pluck up” all that is good, true and honorable, and “to pull down” all that is evil, deceitful and exploitive. We go “to destroy and overthrow” systems that empower and encourage violence, hatred and exceptionalism for some, and we go “to build and to plant” whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, we think about these things² and as another prophet wrote,

Fear not,
for I am with you;
be not dismayed,
for I am your God;
I will *strengthen* you,
I will *help* you,
I will *uphold* you
with my righteous right hand.³

In my research for this sermon I came across this other writing. Unfortunately, I have no idea who wrote it but I think it’s really a perfect way to end. It’s called...

Do Not Be Afraid

We should be afraid, of course,
to be so near to God.

We should be startled by the glory of God
and the disruption of angels.

We should be freaked out that God even blinks
in our direction, let alone that God dares us
to walk a new path just to see what
God can do with life.

“Do not be afraid; have a child.”
“Do not be afraid; leave your home.”
“Do not be afraid; give up your reputation.”
“Do not be afraid; press on through hardship.”
“Do not be afraid; face a powerful enemy.”

² Philippians 4:8

³ Isaiah 41:10

Or,
be afraid.
Be totally overwhelmed.
Be stunned and terrified, in fact,
but here's the critical part:

be near to God
anyway.

People of the promise, people of God, Fear not!
AMEN?