



Today

July/Aug 2021

refresh, refocus, renew

‘DON’T BE AFRAID’

ALSO: LIVING OUR FAITH

Dear Friends:

What is faith? According to the dictionary, *faith* is “complete trust or confidence in someone or something.” For a Christian definition, we could add that *faith* is “strong belief in God and the teachings of Christianity, based on spiritual understanding rather than proof.” And perhaps an equally important question is “What does faith look like in action?”



For the month of July, Pastor Harvey Kiekoover draws on his many years as a missionary, pastor, and chaplain to illustrate living faith. Through stories of ordinary people whose faith strengthened his own faith, he challenges us to live out our faith in honor to God.

In August, Pastor Bret Lamsma explores Bible passages dealing with fear and being afraid. These passages shed light on what we fear, and they help us to live into Jesus' kind command “Don't be afraid.” The Bible also often reminds us that we should “fear” (respect, honor, adore, and worship) God. This fear of God provides great comfort, assuring us that God our Savior is in control and will never leave or forsake us or the world he has made.

May God's Word refresh, refocus, and renew you each day!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kurt Selles". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

—Kurt Selles

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**“Living Our Faith”
Harvey Kiekoover**



**“ ‘Don’t Be Afraid’ ”
Bret Lamsma**

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**ReFrame
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Living Our Faith

Harvey Kiekoever

july

In Luke 18:8, Jesus asks, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" How would you answer Jesus' question?

In July, Harvey Kiekoever reflects on his experiences as a missionary teacher in Nigeria, as a church pastor in the United States, and later as a nursing home chaplain. The people he writes about are ordinary Christians whose faith has encouraged him in his faith walk. May these stories encourage you as well!

Harvey Kiekoever grew up on a Michigan farm and studied to go into pastoral ministry. He served as a teacher in Nigeria and as a pastor and chaplain in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He and his wife became the parents of three sons, and he enjoys spending time with his six grandchildren.

'Don't Be Afraid'

Bret Lamsma

august

This month we will take a look at some of the passages in the Bible that deal with fear and being afraid. Through story and lesson we will wonder together why we fear what we do and why we don't need to live in fear. We will also realize that while Jesus tells us to not fear the things of this world, he reminds us to fear (respect, honor, adore, and worship) his Father, our Creator God. As we examine fear, we will find that we can always trust that God our Savior is in control and holding on to us.

Bret Lamsma is director of faith formation at a church in Denver, Colorado, and has served churches in Michigan and California in youth and intergenerational ministries. Bret and his wife, Julie, have two children, and together they enjoy hiking, camping, and visiting national parks.

FEAR NO EVIL

I will fear no evil, for you are with me. . . .

—Psalm 23:4

The picturesque language of Psalm 23 always makes me think about being outside and hiking. I remember hiking an unfamiliar trail with my wife a few years ago. It was early spring, and the trail was bordered by heavy trees on both sides. It was also very muddy, and there was no one else around. It seemed that at any moment some threat could jump out from behind any tree we passed, or from inside the abandoned mines and cabins we hiked past. I'll admit that I was scared.

The psalmist knew what it was like to follow trails like that. He no doubt drew on his experience of walking through lonely canyons or narrow valleys, ready for a wild animal or an enemy to attack. He knew what it was to be afraid. But he also knew what it was to be led by God—the good

shepherd—through frightening places. God had taken care of him throughout his whole life—and even when things seemed most frightening, he knew he didn't need to be afraid because God was with him.

Our lives are filled with dark valleys—times when everything seems to be out to get us or there seems to be no comfort. During those times we need to remember that God is with us, watching over us and guiding us. He will bring us through to green pastures and will restore our souls.

Good Shepherd, when we are walking through dark valleys, help us not to be afraid. Lead us through and restore our souls. In Jesus, Amen.

WHY ARE YOU SO AFRAID?

"You of little faith, why are you so afraid?"

—Matthew 8:26

When my son was younger, he had a strong fear of stormy winds. They used to keep him up at night. Now that he's a bit older, I'd say he has a healthy respect for what winds can do. If a storm wakes him at night, he will check outside to make sure that nothing from our back porch has blown away and that our chickens are safe. I think lots of us have a little fear of some types of bad weather.

The disciples had every right to be afraid of the storm that came upon their boat. The waves were sweeping right in! It is hard to fault them for fearing for their lives. But when they woke up Jesus, he asked why they didn't have any faith. It's easy for us to read this and think, "Of course their boat wasn't going to sink; Jesus was on it!" But when you are in the middle of a frightening situation, rational thinking is one

of the first things to go—not to mention faith.

A lack of faith and the onset of fear are often paired in the Bible. It may seem unfair at times to blame our fear on a lack of faith. But when it comes down to it, our faith in God and his promises are enough to overcome all fears.

God doesn't promise that we won't ever be in frightening situations. But he *does* ask us to trust him all the time. Even if the situation we are in goes terribly wrong, we are still children of God. Our destiny is in his hands, and he is ultimately in control.

Lord, help us to trust in you even in the most frightful circumstances. Remind us that you are always in control. Amen.

BE STRONG AND COURAGEOUS

"Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go."
—Joshua 1:9

It's natural to have some fear or apprehension at the beginning of a new task. We may ask ourselves questions like "What if I don't know what to do?" or "What if I'm not good enough?" Every time I stand up in front of a group of people to present something—whether it's a sermon, a lecture, or a presentation of some kind—those questions run through my head and are accompanied by fear and doubt.

In our passage today Joshua had just been told that Moses, the leader of God's people, was dead. And now God told Joshua that he would be the one to lead the people. What a huge task! We couldn't blame Joshua for at least having a little fear. But God tells him to be strong and courageous and not to be afraid or discouraged. And this encouragement is more than a pep talk. This is

God's promise to Joshua that wherever he goes in the new land that God would bring them into—and however hard the task before him would be—God would always be right there with him.

We face difficulties all the time—at work and school, and with our families and friends. We have many opportunities to be discouraged and afraid. But God's promise to us is the same as it was to Joshua: God will be with us wherever we go.

And if God is with us, what do we have to fear?

Ever-present God, you promise to be with us wherever we go. Help us to remember this truth in the difficult tasks that lie ahead of us each day. Amen.

PEACE

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. . . . Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." —John 14:27

The day our family left Michigan to move to California will be forever etched in my memory. As we said goodbye to friends and a dearly loved community, we left with tears in our eyes. Transitions can be difficult. They leave us with unsettled feelings and uncertainty about the road ahead. They leave us with troubled hearts and almost anything but peace.

As Jesus prepared his disciples for his departure, he promised that they would receive the Holy Spirit and that he would come back one day. He had prepared them well for what was next. But I think he knew that this transition would still be very difficult for them. He knew they would have a lot of fear about what the future had in store. So he gave them this message of peace—saying that he would give them his peace.

Transitions are just one thing that can bring about fear in our lives. Fear of what lies ahead and fear of the unknown can be very strong. But all our fears can be overcome by the Lord's peace, which he gives us each day.

When your life is filled with lots of changes and unknowns, turn to the peace that Jesus has promised. The peace that he has given can bring us through times of trouble and fear.

God of peace who gives us peace, turn our hearts from trouble and fear in the midst of the unknown. Grant us your peace every day. Amen.

DO NOT BE AFRAID

"Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people."
—Luke 2:10

Can you imagine being one of the shepherds in this story? You're sitting in a field at night with a few other shepherds around. You're watching over your sheep as they sleep nearby. You might be ready to doze off yourself. Then suddenly an angel appears, and the glory of the Lord is everywhere! Fear would be just one of the emotions you felt at that moment.

It's probably a good thing that the angel began the message to the shepherds with "Do not be afraid." The shepherds' initial reaction might otherwise have been to either run away or take a swing at the angel with their staffs or clubs. Fear can be so paralyzing that it can make anything that comes after it hard to remember. In a state of terrifying fear the shepherds might not even have heard the great news that the angel had come to bring.

Fear can often cause *us* to stop hearing the good news as well. When we get so wrapped up in the things in our lives that make us afraid, we often miss many other messages and opportunities.

If the shepherds had remained in their state of terror, they wouldn't have heard the message about the birth of Jesus. They wouldn't have known to go and find him. And they wouldn't have heard about the peace he would bring.

What fears in your life might be stopping you from hearing the good news today?

God in the highest heaven,
take away the fear in our
lives that keeps us from
hearing the good news
of great joy that you are
bringing us today. Amen.

A FAMILIAR VOICE

"Get up," he said. "Don't be afraid." When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.
—Matthew 17:7-8

Some years ago when I was a young youth pastor, I sat on the edge of a tall, wooden tower, strapped to a zipline cable, with the whole youth group on the ground below cheering me on. I hate heights, and the thought of jumping from a perfectly good tower for no reason still makes me break into a cold sweat. But I wanted to show my students that I could conquer my fear and zipline to the bottom. The staff member behind me was a good friend and was close enough to hear me. I whispered to him that I was afraid and he was going to have to push me off the edge. He whispered back that everything would be fine, and then he pushed.

Boldness got me only so far that day. It got me up the tower, strapped in, and to the edge of the platform. But then my fear overtook me, and I

needed a familiar voice—and a push—to go the rest of the way.

Peter, James, and John followed Jesus a long way. Their boldness took them to the top of a mountain and watched as Jesus was transfigured and he talked with Moses and Elijah. When God's voice sounded from the heavens, though, fear overtook them. But then Jesus came over and said, "Don't be afraid." His familiar voice called them out of fear.

When you are afraid, take a moment to listen for Jesus' voice calling you out of your fear. You might be surprised at the form that voice takes, but it will always be there.

Lord Jesus, when we are afraid, help us to listen for your voice calling to us. Amen.

AFRAID TO ASK

They did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.
—Mark 9:32

Maybe you have heard the saying “There’s no such thing as a dumb question.” We have all had times when we wanted to ask something but didn’t have the courage to ask.

In school, for example, there were many times when I wanted to ask a question in class but simply didn’t have the courage to ask. Maybe I thought it wasn’t a good question. Maybe I was afraid of the answer. Or maybe I thought that instead of a straight answer I would get a question in return that would prove my lack of knowledge.

Jesus had now told his disciples twice that he would die and be raised again from the dead. Can you imagine the questions they must have had about that? But they were afraid to ask. Maybe they were afraid because they thought they should understand this already. Or maybe they were afraid be-

cause they didn’t want Jesus to ask them any follow-up questions. Or maybe they were afraid to ask because they weren’t sure they wanted to know the answers.

We all have questions that we want to ask God but are afraid to ask.

Yet we don’t need to be afraid to ask God anything. In fact, he wants us to bring our questions, doubts, and fears to him.

What questions are you afraid to ask? Take some time to bring those to God today.

Heavenly Father, help us to overcome our fears and bring our questions, concerns, doubts, and worries to you today. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

REGRETS

"Don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them. —Genesis 50:21

We all have regrets. We regret things we did in the past that we wish we hadn't done. For example, I remember calling someone a nasty name when I was young. Even though that was more than 35 years ago, I still think about it sometimes and regret what I did. Maybe for you what sticks in your mind is some action that you still regret. Maybe no one else even knows that you did. And when you think about it, maybe you are filled with fear of being found out or accused.

Joseph's brothers had sold him into slavery many years earlier and had lied to cover it up (see Genesis 37-45). But recently they had learned that Joseph was now a powerful ruler and that he had also forgiven them for what they had done. But after their father, Jacob, died, they were afraid that Joseph would punish them and make

them pay for what they had done to him. But Joseph assured them that they had nothing to be afraid of. He had forgiven them and would keep caring for them and their families.

God doesn't want us to live in fear for what we have done. In Christ, God has forgiven us completely for all the wrong things we have done. Jesus' sacrifice for us paid the price for all of those past transgressions. And as a result, we have been made new through Jesus Christ. So we have nothing to fear!

Forgiving God, forgive us for our past sins. Replace our fears with the assurance of your love and forgiveness forever. Amen.

MORE REGRETS

Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: "Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times." And he went outside and wept bitterly.
—Matthew 26:75

Sometimes the things we regret are not things that we have done but things that we haven't done. For example, after a conversation or a meeting, I'll think back and wish I had said or done something differently—for a better result. We can all think of things that we wish we would have done, but didn't.

On the night that Jesus was arrested, Peter denied three times that he even knew Jesus. And even though Jesus forgave him, I wouldn't be surprised if Peter recalled that night often, wishing he had stood up and told the truth. No doubt, fear played a big role in Peter's denials. Fear of being found out. Fear of being associated with an accused man. Fear of being tried and killed himself. But then I wonder if a form of fear might also have visited Peter years later as he recalled those

events—fear tied to regret for not doing what he should have done.

Fear plays the same games with us at times. Perhaps we are afraid of consequences, or of being judged, or of what it might cost to speak the truth. And later, as we think back to those times, maybe we are afraid again—afraid that our character wasn't good enough or that we will be judged for not doing right.

But we have to give those failings to God. God has forgiven us, and his perfect love drives fear away (1 John 4:18).

Lord, help us to do what's right in all situations—and please take away our fears. In Jesus' name, Amen.

WORRY

"Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?"
—Matthew 6:27

One of the things we tend to fear most is that we might run out of resources. Jesus calls it worry here. For example, we can lie awake at night worrying that we won't have enough money to pay our bills, or that we might lose our job, or that our car might break down.

Jesus points to the birds, which don't sow or reap or store away. God cares for them every day. Jesus points to the flowers, which don't labor or spin. They are clothed in splendor one day and are gone the next. If God cares for some of these simpler parts of his creation, won't he care for *our* needs as well?

It's magnificent to hear about God caring for us. In the midst of fear and worry this is exactly what we need. But then even if we hear this one day and realize how much God cares for us, we can fall back into

the same worry again the next day. It seems to be wrapped into our DNA to worry about what we will eat and drink and wear and so on. I'm not sure we will ever stop worrying about losing everything. Fortunately, though, God's assurance is present just as often as our fears are.

A day will likely come soon when you will worry about what you will eat or wear—or about something else you will need. When that happens, remember that our Father in heaven cares for us more than we can even imagine.

Father, when we are afraid and we worry, assure us through your Word and your presence that you love us and care for us each day in every way. Amen.

EYES ON JESUS

But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!"
—Matthew 14:30

On Monday nights my wife and I often join with a group of people and drive harness horses at a local stable. When I'm in the seat of a wagon, holding the lines and controlling the horses, it seems so simple and natural. It feels like I could do it forever. But when I stop to think about what we are doing—with large, powerful horses tied only by straps to each other and pulling a heavy wagon that several people are riding in—I get scared. Then I start thinking about everything that could go wrong, and I want to get out of the wagon right away. When I stop focusing on what I'm doing and take my eyes off the goal, I start to sink and get afraid.

Peter was walking toward Jesus on the water. He was doing it! And then he realized what was going on around him. He

took his eyes off Jesus, became afraid, and began to sink.

How often in our faith journey do we take our eyes off Jesus? We easily get focused on other things, and we lose sight of who Jesus is and what his plans for us are. And then we, like Peter, become afraid and begin to sink.

Jesus is there, though, reaching out to us in the middle of the storm. Even in our deepest fear, he reaches out to us, grabs hold of us, and brings us back to where we belong.

Savior God, when we take our eyes off you and begin to sink, reach out and take hold of us. Calm our fears and bring us back to you. Amen.

COMMUNAL FEAR

Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.
—Acts 5:11

Over the past year, multiple crises have caused community-wide fear. A global pandemic has left millions dead and has caused disruption in all areas of life. Racist violence and oppression have gone unchecked and unresolved, and some protests have ended in destruction and bloodshed. Contested elections in several countries have caused more disruption, violence, and suspicion. All of these things and more have left people wondering what will come next. As a result, many people are living in fear.

I don't think that the "great fear" that "seized the whole church" in Acts was due only to what happened to Ananias and Sapphira. Most of the people didn't need to be worried about being punished in the same way. They knew that God is powerful and that truth-telling is important. But what

they *didn't* know was what might happen next—and that is probably what they were afraid of.

When the world shut down from COVID-19 in 2020, we didn't know what would happen next. We didn't know when things would return to normal. We didn't know who would get sick. All of that caused fear. But throughout everything, God was and is in control. So we can remain calm. We can do what we need to do to stay safe. We can follow God's will for our lives and for our communities. And we can trust that no matter what happens, God is still in control.

Father God, when fear seizes all of us, guide us to live in trust and to show your love. Amen.

HOPELESSNESS

"Cries of fear are heard—terror, not peace."

—Jeremiah 30:4

Anyone who has battled depression knows the feeling of "terror, not peace" described by Jeremiah. A few years ago I experienced a time in which I felt I had lost my calling to work in ministry. I felt that I couldn't do anything right and that I had no reason to be working in ministry anymore. I felt lost, alone, and helpless. I was afraid.

As Jeremiah prophesies about Israel and Judah, he describes them in a very helpless situation. They are an enslaved people living a seemingly hopeless existence. The only thing that they know to do is to cry out in fear and in terror. Peace is not a companion that they know.

But the Lord doesn't leave them there. In their time of trouble, God hears them, and he promises that he is with them and will deliver them.

God hears us when we cry out in terror and fear, just as he heard Israel and Judah. He hears us in our hopelessness. And God doesn't leave us there.

No matter how alone you might feel, God is with you. No matter how afraid you might be, God has you in his hands. So when fear and terror overwhelm you, look for God. When peace is nowhere to be found and helplessness overwhelms you, God is there to calm your fears and deliver you from captivity.

Delivering God, fear overwhelms us so often, and peace can seem so far away. Bring us out of that place and into your arms today. Amen.

FISH FOR PEOPLE

Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people."
—Luke 5:10

I was with a group of students on a service trip several years ago. We were doing repairs on some houses that had been damaged by a hurricane. None of us was particularly skilled at what we were doing, but we had all volunteered to be there and to work as hard as we could. Though we weren't the most skilled crew ever, we ended up accomplishing more than we were expected to. By the end of our stay, we all knew that God had blessed our efforts and had made us successful in what we did.

Though we did more work than we had imagined, our first response wasn't like Peter's. It wasn't a response of fear. But, looking back, I think I can understand Peter's reaction. He and the other fishermen had been working hard all night and hadn't caught any fish. Then Jesus came along and

told them to fish on the other side of the boat. The resulting catch almost sank their boats! That day Peter got a glimpse of who Jesus is and how powerful he is, and that made him afraid.

When God shows up, it can be frightening. When God works through us, it can be disorienting.

But Jesus' response makes sense. Don't be afraid that God is doing amazing things through you and around you. Instead, take the amazing things that God has done and show and tell others about them. Share the good news of God's work and glorify him!

Lord and God, help us to respond to your work with excitement, not fear. And may we give you all the glory. Amen.

WITH ME

The LORD is with me; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?
—Psalm 118:6

Am I the only one who balks at the question that the psalmist asks here—“What can mere mortals do to me?”

I think we all know what the psalmist is getting at here, but people can be mean! They can hurt us verbally, emotionally, psychologically, and physically. And my guess is that we've all experienced at least one of those hurts, if not all of them. I don't necessarily live in daily fear of physical harm, but some people do—and that can be devastating. However, I do live in fear of being hurt by people's words. Every time I open my email, I'm afraid of what someone else might say about something I did.

Still, the psalmist knew all of that as well as we do. He was pursued and threatened with bodily harm. But even in the midst of threats and dangers, he was able to give thanks to

God, confess that the Lord was with him, and be certain that mere mortals could not ultimately destroy him.

While people might be able to hurt our bodies or minds, they can't hurt our souls. And while people can hurt us in this world, they can't hurt us forever. That is the message the psalmist wants us to hear. We aren't assured of health and safety on this earth. But we don't need to fear what anyone on this earth can do to us. They cannot control our destiny. With God, we can be certain that our destiny is in his hands.

Eternal God, even when we are hard pressed and threatened, help us remember that you are God and that nothing can take us away from you. Amen.

FEAR GOD

"Fear the LORD your God, serve him only. . . ."

—Deuteronomy 6:13

Fear can be caused by many things. It can come from not knowing or understanding something. It can come when we face danger. It can come when we discover something more powerful than we are—or something that we imagine is more powerful.

God knew his people would face many fears as they entered a new land. They would encounter things they didn't understand, and they would face powerful enemies. They were literally walking into the unknown.

God also knew that the fear of something powerful could lead people to veneration and worship as well. And that was one thing God would not allow. He didn't want his people to worship other gods, or idols, or the sun or moon, or riches, or anything else. None of those things could bless his people with full

life. Only God could do that. So he called them to fear, worship, and serve him only.

In our world today, we might think that sounds rather silly. After all, we don't worship other gods like the people of other nations did back then. But we need to be careful. There are many things in our lives that we treat with awe and devotion. There are many things we can love or fear instead of God. But God wants us to fear and love only him. His power and glory are beyond anything we can imagine. Watch out for things in your life that can distract you and keep you from serving God.

Lord and God, help us to fear you alone and to serve you alone. Help us to love you with everything we have. Amen.

MERCY TO THOSE WHO FEAR HIM

"His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation."
—Luke 1:50

I've never been so excited that I broke into song or poetry. But I can remember Christmas mornings when I was so excited that I couldn't wait to open gifts. When my wife and I started dating, I found it really hard to focus on my homework. But I've never broken into song like Mary did, as we can see in Luke 1.

Imagine Mary's excitement. She was pregnant with the Son of God and had just been blessed by her relative Elizabeth—who became the mother of John the Baptist (Luke 1:57-80). Mary rejoiced in song, the song that we have read today in Luke 1. In the middle of that song, Mary sings that the Lord extends mercy to those who fear God. This might make us confused. Isn't fear a bad thing?

In many places in Scripture, fear is equated to awe, devo-

tion, and even worship in connection with God. God does amazing things—things that are so far beyond our comprehension that fear may be the only appropriate response. After all, God created the universe—and you and me too. And he didn't abandon us even when we turned our backs on him. He guided all of history to bring his good plans for us to completion. He sent his only Son to be born a human being, to live as we live, and to die for our sake—paying the price for all our sins. And he still loves us today. There's no better reaction to all of this than awe, reverence, worship—and yes, even fear.

Awesome God, you are so great, and you do utterly amazing things. We join with creation in worshipping you. Amen.

RUTHLESS RULE

"Do not rule over them ruthlessly, but fear your God."

—Leviticus 25:43

I remember a bully on the school bus when I was a kid. He used to do mean things to others—picking on them, humiliating them, and generally making life miserable on the bus ride home. Everyone hated getting on the bus because of him. What it boiled down to was that we were all afraid of what he might do or whom he and his friends might pick on that day. We lived in constant fear under his "rule."

Lots of people use fear to get other people to do what they want. From bullies on the bus to leaders of countries—fear can be a terrific and horrific motivator.

When God was teaching the people of Israel how to get along with each other, he made sure to tell them not to rule ruthlessly over each other. Ruthless rule uses fear to motivate and control. That

kind of rule robs everyone of their dignity and of the image of God in them. God didn't want his people to be treated that way or to treat others that way. Ruling by fear would not be allowed in God's kingdom.

When we use fear to control others, we do exactly what God doesn't want us to do. He wants us to live in peace with each other. And when we are in charge of others, God wants us to treat them with love and respect. Ruthlessly ruling with fear has no place in our interactions with others.

Ruler God, thank you for loving us. Help us to treat others with the same love you have for us. If we are mistreating others, please change our hearts. Amen.

MORE AFRAID

When Pilate heard this, he was even more afraid. . . .

—John 19:8

Pilate was in a no-win situation. On the one hand, he had an angry mob outside his door demanding the execution of an innocent man. On the other hand, this man seemed to stand in opposition to the ruling government, and Pilate couldn't have that news get back to Rome. This does not let Pilate off the hook for his decision, though.

Whether Pilate's fear stemmed from the unruly mob, the Roman authorities, or the consequences of killing an innocent man, we can't be sure. In the end all we know is that Pilate was afraid and acted out of fear.

Fear can cause all of us to make bad decisions. And while the decisions we make out of fear don't have the same consequences that Pilate's decision did, they are still serious. At times they can even have dire

consequences for us, for our family members, and for our community.

We don't have to make decisions that way. Fear doesn't need to be and should not be the driving force behind any decisions we make.

In Christ we have been set free from all sorts of things, including fear. As free children of God, we don't live in fear anymore.

Holy God, you have set us free. Help us to live lives and make decisions that reflect freedom and not fear. In Jesus' name, Amen.

I WAS AFRAID

He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."
—Genesis 3:10

Picture the scenario. A child does something that they know they aren't supposed to do. Maybe they broke something they weren't supposed to play with. They knew they were going to be in trouble when a parent found out, so they hid in a closet, or in their backyard, or maybe even in a tree fort, hoping to escape the consequences of their actions.

Adam and Eve sinned against God. They knew that he had told them not to eat from one of the trees in the garden. But they gave in to temptation and ate the fruit of that tree anyway. Like children afraid of a parent, Adam and Eve hid from God, hoping to escape the consequences of their actions. Adam and Eve were afraid of what God might say or do to them because of their disobedience.

While there certainly were consequences for their sin—consequences that we still experience today—there was also forgiveness and grace. God continued to care for them. He didn't just leave them to themselves. In fact, from the moment of their sin God began to shape history toward reconciling Adam and Eve and all of their children to himself.

While God hates sin, he loves us and has gone to extraordinary lengths to bring us back to him. Forgiveness and grace are God's gifts to his people every day.

Gracious God, we sin against you all too often. But your grace and mercy abound in our lives, so we don't need to be afraid. And for that we give thanks. Amen.

ALLEVIATING FEAR

Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"

—Acts 16:28

When someone is afraid, you can see it in their eyes. I was on a service trip with a group of students, and we were serving a meal at a soup kitchen. A small fight broke out among some of the patrons, and I could see fear building in the students' eyes. We quickly got the students into the kitchen and watched from the door as the nuns who ran the soup kitchen handled the fight. But the fear that we experienced in that moment was real.

I remember the nuns talking to us afterward and commenting on our fear. While they understood it, they didn't seem to have the same fear. They had seen all of this before and didn't seem nervous about it at all. Sometimes it takes someone who is not experiencing fear to call out the fear in someone else in order to get rid of it.

In our story from Acts today, when the jailer realized that all of the prisoners in his charge might have escaped, he was so afraid that he was ready to take his own life. But Paul shouted to him that there was no need to harm himself. There was no need to be afraid! Everyone was still there.

As followers of Christ, we don't need to be afraid. And we can also help others address their fears. In fact, we have the duty to help others in this way by introducing them to Jesus. Whom do you know that is living in fear? How can you come alongside them and help them out of their fears?

Lord, help us to walk with others and call out the fear in their lives. And help us to introduce others to you. Amen.

SICKNESS AND DEATH

"Don't be afraid, just believe. . . ."

—Luke 8:50

I was talking to a friend a while back who was dealing with many health concerns. As he was about to undergo another major surgery, he said that while he was anxious about his health and didn't want to die, he wasn't necessarily afraid of being sick or dying. I asked why—and he said he knew that whatever happened, God was in control.

A trembling woman who had been sick for many years approached Jesus. Then she touched the edge of his cloak and was immediately healed! While she was afraid to speak up about what she had done, Jesus assured her that her faith in him had made her well.

A father whose daughter was dying fell at Jesus' feet begging for his daughter's life. He was afraid to lose her—and even more afraid when he heard that she was dead. But Jesus

assured him that she would be fine. "Just believe," he said, "and she will be healed."

Sickness and death are things that we all fear in one way or another. But as we look at these grim realities, we need to see them through the lens of Jesus' sacrifice for us and God's love for us. Sickness and death won't go away until the Lord's return, but we don't need to fear them as we would if we did not know about God's love for us.

Loving God, we fear sickness and death in our lives and in the lives of our loved ones. Help us to overcome those fears and to rely on your love even when we are afraid. Amen.

THE UNKNOWN

You do not even know what will happen tomorrow.

—James 4:14

My kids and I like to watch a TV show about unsolved mysteries and hunts for lost treasure around the world. Sometimes it's just fascinating to learn about faraway places and people and events we have never heard about before. But sometimes the unknown can be a bit frightening. As the host of the show crawls through tight tunnels and scrambles through ancient ruins, the unknown can be a little scary.

James says that we don't know what will happen tomorrow. That's true, of course. The future is wholly unknown to us. We can plan and think that we know what we will do, but in the end, all of our planning and hoping about the future doesn't promise anything. Even the best laid plans can fall apart. We simply don't know what the future will hold. It is

out of our control, and that can be frightful.

But what isn't frightening is knowing that God is in control. As Jesus says when he teaches his disciples how to pray—and James echoes that here—"God's will be done." And God's will *will* be done. So whatever fear you might have about the future, you can be assured that God not only knows what will happen but is also in control of it.

God holds us in his hands. We don't need to fear the unknown.

God of the future, help us not to fear what is to come. Help us to remember always that you hold the unknown in your hands. Amen.

KEEP ON

One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent."
—Acts 18:9

A pastor friend of mine got up in front of his congregation one morning and spoke boldly. A lot had been going on in the world during the previous weeks and months. He was a bit anxious about what he felt he had to say—but he knew it was the truth, and he knew it had to be said.

What he shared that morning was the good-news message of Jesus. That may sound simple and expected, but sometimes it is not easy to share that message. He reminded everyone that they needed to love one another as Christ loves us. Be people of truth—God's truth—he said. Don't hate others. Don't hurt others.

Speaking out boldly for what you know is right can be frightening. Even if it is right, it might not be popular. In fact, the gospel message of Jesus often isn't popular. It can seem

foolish and countercultural. Jesus himself was crucified for it, and many of his followers were persecuted, put in jail, or killed for it as well. Even though speaking boldly can be frightening, the truth can't be hidden.

Paul was preaching the Word of God, and people were upset with him. But God encouraged him to continue speaking and not to be afraid.

That same encouragement is for us today too. When we have the opportunity to speak the truth of the gospel, we must do so boldly. Even if we are attacked for it, God will be with us.

Present God, help us to speak your truth and your gospel boldly whenever we have the opportunity. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

LOVE

"There is no fear in love."

—1 John 4:18

I remember when I fell in love with the woman who became my wife. We were in college, we had been getting to know each other for a while, and then we started dating. I knew I was in love when I realized I wasn't afraid to be myself in front of her anymore. I could share my deepest thoughts with her about my career, my future goals, my plans, my faith, and my family. Although sharing those things made me vulnerable, I knew that she wouldn't try to use any of that against me. I wasn't afraid that she would run away or leave when I was sad or angry or frustrated or goofy. Being loved and being in love took away my fears.

Now, if being in love with my wife made my fear go away, how much more should knowing the love of God take my fear away! "God is love," says

the apostle John in our Bible reading for today, and "there is no fear in love."

As we grow more and more in our relationship with God, he drives out the fear in our lives. And while our fear may never go away completely until we are with God in heaven, his love can take away our fear even in the darkest valleys we might pass through (Psalm 23:4).

The next time you are afraid, take your fear to God. Let his love wash over you. Ask him to take your fear away and to replace it with his perfect love.

Loving God, we experience fear in this world. Take away our fear and replace it with your perfect love, we pray. In Jesus' name, Amen.

FILLED WITH JOY

So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples.
—Matthew 28:8

One of the most exciting outings for a church youth group is a trip to an amusement park. I remember taking a group on a trip like that when I lived in Michigan. I'm not a big fan of roller coasters, but I climbed onto one called the Top Thrill Dragster. That roller coaster went from 0 to 120 miles per hour in 3.8 seconds and would take its riders 420 feet up in the air. It was an amazing ride that I never want to go on again. It was exhilarating and frightening at the same time.

As the women left the tomb on the morning that Jesus had risen from the dead, they were filled with both fear and joy. They had come to the tomb looking for Jesus' body, and instead they met a mighty angel, who said that Jesus had risen. Seeing the angel and not finding what they were figuring on made them afraid. But hearing

that their friend, teacher, and Lord had risen from the dead gave them joy.

Fear can often be accompanied by joy. Our lives can be filled with fear about all sorts of things—fear about our health, our jobs, or our future. But our lives can be filled with joy about the same things as well—our health, careers, and future. We can be both afraid of our future and joyful about our future possibilities. The next time fear overtakes you, ask God to help you find a reason to be joyful as well. Our future is in his hands.

Father of joy, when fear seems all too present, help us to see that we can also rejoice in the fact that you hold us in your hands. We rejoice in you. Amen.

DON'T FEAR WHAT OTHERS FEAR

"Do not fear what they fear, and do not dread it."

—Isaiah 8:12

The world around us fears all sorts of things. I was reading a few articles about what people fear the most. Things like heights, snakes, and the dentist top a lot of people's lists. But so do things like economic disaster, wars, terrorism, and natural disasters. These are things that the world fears.

But the Lord tells Isaiah not to fear what people fear when they don't live in tune with God. While the rest of the world might be afraid of upheaval and destruction, Isaiah isn't supposed to fear such things. He isn't supposed to be afraid of conspiracies or of being physically hurt. He isn't supposed to be afraid of being too bold or saying the wrong thing. He isn't supposed to be afraid of what the future might hold. He isn't even supposed to be afraid of not having a next meal or warm clothes

or a place to sleep. While the world might fear and worry over those things, Isaiah isn't supposed to.

Isaiah is supposed to fear only God. Everything else is in God's control. He will take care of all things. All that Isaiah has to do is obey God and fear him—that is, honor, worship, and be in awe of him.

We are called to do the same. There are many things to fear in this world. But God doesn't want us to fear any of them. He wants us to fear only him. So in the fear of the Lord, worship and honor him today in everything you do.

Worthy God, help us to fear, worship, and honor you alone so that we may rest in the comfort of your love. Amen.

BLESS US

May God bless us still, so that all the ends of the earth will fear him.
—Psalm 67:7

A local congregation was blessed by great financial giving throughout a difficult time. The leaders of this church felt so blessed by God through their members that they knew they had to reach out and share this blessing with the community around them. They began calling local homeless shelters and other ministries and organizations that they thought might need assistance. And soon several organizations were able to share those blessings with people in need—to the glory of God.

Being blessed with financial resources or good health isn't a guarantee from following God. He never promises that we will live healthy and wealthy lives on this earth. But when God does bless us, we are called to share what God has given us and bless others. When God first called Abraham, God

promised to bless him, saying that through him all the peoples on earth would be blessed (Genesis 12:1-3).

Psalm 67 is a prayer asking God to bless his people so that through that blessing, the other nations of the world would be blessed with God's salvation and fear him. In this setting, fear is described in terms of knowledge, worship, and adoration of God. This prayer asks God to bless his people so that all people may come to know God and worship him for all he has done. Let that be our prayer today as well.

Blessing God, bless your people not for our sake but so that we can share with others, that all may come to know and honor you. Amen.

WHOM YOU SHOULD FEAR

"I will show you whom you should fear. . . ."

—Luke 12:5

When I was in high school, my dad died of cancer. That was a very frightening and lonely time for me. I had lots of questions about God and death. How could God take away my dad when I was only 14? How could he let someone who was a pastor who loved people and freely shared the gospel suffer and die? I was angry with God and was sure that he didn't care about me. Those feelings filled me with a lot of hopelessness and fear.

As Jesus talks to his disciples, he addresses some of the same questions I had when I was 14. He talks about sparrows—a common and inexpensive bird. Jesus assures his followers that if God cares about them—and, yes, he does!—then of course God cares much more about each one of us. So Jesus reminds his disciples, "Do not be afraid. . . ."

Instead of fearing anyone or anything on this earth that might hurt us, he says, the only one we should fear is God himself. After all, God holds every part of our lives in his hands. That might seem frightening, but in the end, when God's control is paired with his care for us, we don't need to be afraid that God will forget about us. God's love for us is greater than we can imagine. No matter what happens, God loves us and calls us to worship and adore him because of that love.

Loving God, you care for us more than we could know. No matter what we go through, let us worship and adore you through it all. Amen.

FEAR FOR NOTHING?

“Does Job fear God for nothing?”

—Job 1:9

I can remember a time in college when everything was going really well. I had lots of friends, I was getting good grades, I was having fun, I was involved in a great church, my relationship with God was thriving, and I even enjoyed my part-time job. Everything was going great, and I was extremely happy.

When everything is going well, it is relatively easy to honor and praise God and follow him wholeheartedly—to fear God in the biblical sense of being devoted to him.

In Job 1, Satan claimed it was easy for Job to fear God because his life was going so well. Job had 10 children, thousands of animals, and many servants. Job was a great man whose kids threw great parties. He would even offer sacrifices just in case someone in his household sinned against God. So of

course Job feared God, Satan said. His life was great!

As the story of Job continued, however, all those blessings were taken from him. His family, his possessions, and even his health were taken away. Yet Job still feared God. Our devotion to God shouldn't be dependent on how well life is going for us. If we fear God only because life is good, then we really don't fear God at all.

As you think about your devotion to God, make sure you fear God because of who he is and not because he can give you great blessings.

Awesome God, help us to adore and worship you because of who you are—God above all things. Amen.

WHEN JESUS APPEARS

"Take Courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."

—Matthew 14:27

I was on a hike a few years ago with my kids and some other family members. It was late in the day, and although it was early summer, the weather was questionable where we were, high up in the mountains.

We were quite a ways into our hike when the wind suddenly picked up, clouds rolled in, and the temperature dropped. I was kicking myself because I had not packed as I normally would for a hike like this. We didn't have food, warm clothing, a fire starter, or any critical supplies. I was scared. But just when things began looking really bad, the storm shifted, and most of it passed by. Later the sun even came out. I've rarely been happier to see the sun.

Jesus' disciples were out on the lake at night. The wind and waves had picked up considerably since the disciples had

left the shore. No doubt a little bit of worry had settled over them. And then they saw Jesus walking on the water toward them. They didn't recognize him at first, and they were terrified, thinking he was a ghost. But then he called out and assured them that it was him and not to worry. When Jesus shows up, our worries become less important.

There are so many things to be afraid of and to worry about in life. But when Jesus comes into our lives, all of those things can take a back seat. He can push them away and help us be rid of them. Look for Jesus in your life. Ask him to take away your fears.

Lord, fill our lives today, and take away all our worries and fears, we pray. Amen.

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