

“FEAR ITSELF”

A Reflection for the First Sunday of Our National Emergency

**Third Sunday in Lent
March 15, 2020**

**Bethany Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Foxborough, Massachusetts
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“...the only thing we have to fear is fear itself...”
(President Franklin Delano Roosevelt)

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“This is preeminently the time to speak the truth, the whole truth, frankly and boldly. Nor need we shrink from honestly facing conditions in our country today. This great Nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and will prosper. So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself--nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance. In every dark hour of our national life a leadership of frankness and vigor has met with that understanding and support of the people themselves which is essential to victory. I am convinced that you will again give that support to leadership in these critical days. In such a spirit on my part and on yours we face our common difficulties.”

(From the Inaugural Address of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, March 4, 1933)

How reassuring and important it is to have steady, honest words from our leaders in a time of existential crisis. The COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic is unlike anything I have faced in my lifetime, probably in yours as well. There are so many unknowns at this point. Who has it? How much has it spread? How fatal is it? How effective will our efforts be to “flatten the curve” (i.e. slow the spread) of the virus? When will effective tests, treatments, and vaccines become available? What impact will the pandemic have on our personal, social, psychological, and economic well-being? At this point we have more questions than answers, to be sure.

At times like this, President Roosevelt’s words provide much needed wisdom and strength. We need to be reminded that “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself--nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.” The American people were terrified in March of 1933, in the throes of the Great Depression. In just under 3 ½ years, industrial production decreased by almost 50% and foreign trade by 70%, while unemployment increased by over 600% (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Depression). Life was severely disrupted then, only 15 years after the onset of the 1918 global influenza pandemic.

At times like this, we need to protect ourselves as much as possible in order to protect others. The current crisis calls for much more than the “most people don’t get that sick anyway” attitude we have been hearing. While that may be true for you, it is not true for about 20% of the popula-

tion, and even less true for people my age and older, as well as those with underlying health conditions. We have the moral and social obligation, yes, the Christian responsibility, to protect each other from harm, which means observing all of the recommended public and personal health precautions *with vigilance*. I don't want to make you sick! Please do your best not to make me sick. Yes, it's that personal. Because we love and care for each other, we will do our best to protect each other. Bless you for your best efforts in this regard!!!

*Even though COVID-19 vaccine development will take a long time,
many months to a year or more...*

***There is one vaccine that we can all inject into ourselves and others
...immediately!***

We need to inoculate ourselves from fear itself: "...nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance." There is no question that a certain degree of fear is normal and necessary; but, fearing the known is the healthier choice. Focus on what you can control, not on what you can't; such as, personal health precautions, social distancing, maintaining social connection, reaching out for help when you need it, etc. *Triage your sources of information. Listen to the facts as we know them from the experts*, not to opinions. Half-baked and uninformed opinions are just as insidious as the virus itself. Tune them out!

Even more, tune out entirely the ridiculous conspiracy theories, the shaming and scapegoating, that circulate at times like this. Since time immemorial, anxious and fearful people have shamed, shunned, banished and even executed people they believe to be responsible for natural catastrophes, including pandemics. COVID-19 cannot be God's will, or God's punishment for [fill in the blank]. This is not the fault of one nation or another, one ethnic group or another. A virus is a virus is a virus. Viruses do what viruses do. They need vectors to carry them and bodies like ours to reproduce. They are a force of nature and must be respected as such. Tune in to the experts. Tune out "nameless, unreasoning, unjustified" opinions and denials that add to, and do not diminish, the challenges we face and anxieties we feel.

What better time than now to turn to the ancient wisdom and strength of the scriptures. What better time than now to recall and recite Psalm 23.

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.
Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil; for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy[□] shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
my whole life long.

Even though we walk through the “darkest valley” right now, we fear no evil because God is with us. God’s protective tools as our Shepherd (i.e. rod and staff) comfort us, providing strength and hope. And how is God with us? In Spirit and truth – in ways beyond our knowing and seeing, to be sure; but also, in an abundance of ways that we can see. God’s protective tools, the rod of defense and protection, the staff of direction and guidance, are made manifest in the public health, infectious disease, medical, and scientific experts dedicated to serving us at a time like this. God’s protective tools are made manifest in the health care community, first responders, and local authorities doing their best to serve us. Like any shepherd, they are at great risk right now.

Pray for them!

God’s protection and guidance will also be made manifest as we care for each other, offering assistance and encouragement to the best of our ability. Do what Jesus did! Comfort the afflicted and speak the truth. Share Christ’s compassion (the Shepherd’s staff) with others. Stay connected. Keep in touch. Assist as needed. Do what you can, the best you can. Summon also Christ’s courage to speak truth to power and ignorance, to the malevolent and indifferent alike. With the Good Shepherd’s rod of defense, resist hateful blame, hubristic denial, and willful ignorance. We’re all in this together and we all need to be rowing our life boats in the same direction!

Saint Paul shared these words of comfort and strength at a distance, by letter, with first century Christians in Rome. These words are meant for us as well.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

(Romans 8:35, 37-29)

May it be so for us. Even as we “social distance” these days, we need not spiritually distance ourselves. So, keep in touch: with God, and each other. We’ll get through this, one way or another. In the meantime, manage that fear as much as possible! May God’s blessings and peace be with us, now and always.

Amen!

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Please pray with me.

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Eternal God, Mystery and Wonder of the Ages, hear our prayers this day and throughout this stressful season. Guide us through the valley of the shadow of death. Help us to fear no evil and face the unknown. Comfort us with Your protection and guidance. Provide us with the spiritual sustenance and safety we all need in these days of threat, trial, and trouble.

Merciful God, we pray this day for those who are sick in every nation on earth, and for those who care for them. We pray for those in the early stages of their illness, that they might feel the healing comfort of Your presence and receive the care they need. We pray for those living in heavily infected areas, that they might use all of the ways and means available to them to slow the pandemic, ease the demand on health care providers, protect themselves and their loved ones.

We pray as well for all those who serve us in this crisis: for public health leaders and authorities that seek to guide and protect us; for hospitals and clinics, health care providers and first responders, that care for the sick; for the researchers around the world who, this day, are working tirelessly to discover effective treatments and vaccines; for government officials and agencies that heed expert advice and serve to protect us; and, for the everyday people all around us who continue to do their jobs on our behalf.

We pray also for those around us in our state, county, and community, our neighbors and friends, our faith community and other faith communities. Help us to stay connected, offering concern and comfort, aid and assistance, guidance and information. We pray for our families and loved ones, near and far. Help them, and all of us, to stay informed, stay safe, and remain faithful, in spite of our challenges and fears. Through Your Spirit, make us, and maintain us as, a humble, hopeful, and helpful people, eager to serve in Christ's name.

We ask all of this in the name of the Good Shepherd,
Christ our Lord.
Amen.