

**Don't  
Be  
Afraid**



*Advent 2017*



***“Even though I walk  
through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil, for you are with me:  
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”  
Psalm 23:4***

Say each of these words out loud, but slowly: “Trust. Comfort. Rest. Goodness.” I don’t know about you, but in the moment when I’m scared and feel alone, or when it’s too dark to see, I’m not sure I’ve ever been able to clearly sense any of these things. Now say this out loud and fill in the blank: “Whenever I’m afraid, I usually \_\_\_\_\_.”

Most of the time, when I feel threatened by something or read about some horrible tragedy, I tend to feel the opposite of what David claims in this Psalm. Notice that he declares it in the present when he says, “I fear no evil”, not “I hope someday I will fear no evil”. And before that phrase, you see David is aware that he’s walking through darkness. Yet, even in that situation, that low place, he trusts boldly and fully in the presence, guidance and protection of God. In this passage, he appears fearless and confident, sure that God’s promises are true. What does it mean to be fearless, even when you know there’s something to fear? What does it mean to be brave in the presence of struggles pressing against you?

“You Make Me Brave”, an album I recently discovered by Bethel Church, provides powerful imagery about God’s abundant love for us, and strength to conquer what we cannot on our own. Here are a few selected lyrics to ponder as we begin this Advent season of hope-filled waiting and listening together:

*You make me brave; no fear can hinder now the love that made a way /  
And when I was drowning in my doubt, Your mighty right hand lifted me out /  
In the process, in the waiting, You’re making melodies over me /  
Your presence is the promise / You will lift my head above the mighty waves /  
You are the strength that comes from within, Good Shepherd of my soul /  
Take my hand and lead me on*

Prayer: Lead me, guide me along the way, for if you lead me I cannot stray. Lord, let me walk each day with thee. Lead me, O Lord, lead me. Amen.

***“And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”  
Mark 13:37***

This weekend kicks off our Advent sermon series entitled “Don’t Be Afraid.” The theme is inspired by Luke 1:26-38 — the story of the encounter between the young virgin named Mary and the angel Gabriel. In the midst of the frightening, overwhelming, and impossible-to-make-sense-of news that she has been chosen by God for the profound task of conceiving and giving birth to God’s son, Gabriel speaks words of comfort and reassurance. Gabriel says, “Do not be afraid.” God is with you, God will be faithful to you, God will give you the grace and the strength you need to answer God’s call. Don’t be afraid.

There is so much going on in our world right now that causes fear and anxiety and uncertainty. I can’t remember a time in my life when the world seemed so filled with fear. Like Mary, we yearn to be reassured of God’s love and faithfulness. We yearn to discover peace and wholeness, and a sense of God’s sacred presence.

Today’s passage from Mark’s gospel reminds us that amidst the fear and uncertainty God calls us to be ready for God’s love and grace to show up in new ways. God invites us to count on God and trust in God regardless of our present circumstances.

Prayer: Loving Lord teach us anew to trust in you. Regardless of the doubt or darkness that is present in the world or in our lives, help us learn all over again to trust and to believe. Amen.

***“So, do not fear, for I am with you:  
do not be dismayed, for I am your God.  
I will strengthen you and help you.  
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”  
Isaiah 41:10***

If you've ever traveled by airplane, you will remember the standard safety procedure given before take-off: If the cabin loses air pressure, an oxygen mask will drop down from overhead. If you are traveling with someone who requires assistance, put your air mask on first.

Here on land, air pressure usually remains constant, but other pressures change in our day-to-day lives. Often, these changes and pressures stack one atop another, leaving us little room to breathe. We can suffer one life-changing blow, like a devastating diagnosis, loss of job, or relationship difficulties. Or, we can fall apart over something insignificant on its own, that when stacked on a high pile can cause the cooker to explode! When pressure mounts, perspective changes.

We are quick to try and fix issues on our own power, to take on more or to overdo our limits. Sometimes, we numb overwhelming feelings and stress with distractions: overloading schedules, shopping, over (or under) eating, abusing alcohol or drugs, or tuning out with electronics.

When trouble is near, we can be quick to question, *God, where are you? In this verse, it is clear that God is our source of help and strength; it is clear WHO our oxygen is. God promises that He is present, that He will help us, and He will uphold us. Don't waste time freaking out, He tells us: I got this!*

Practice His presence in the calm so that when crisis comes, His oxygen mask will be right over your head. Lay down what haunts you, worries you, tempts you, distracts you. If you learn the sound of His voice in the quiet, you will also hear it amidst the noise of the day and the chaos of crisis.

Dear Lord, thank you for the promise of Your ever-presence. We want the easy life, the peace and harmony that Your grace brings, but we can witness Your greatness especially in dark times. Help us to look to You as the source of our strength and courage, to face the road that lay before us, and to witness to Your great provision, Amen.

***“Do not be afraid, keep on speaking,  
do not be silent.”  
Acts 18:9***

It seems that Paul was discouraged and needed Jesus to comfort and encourage him to move forward with his work. Perhaps Paul was having second thoughts about his vast mission and was overwhelmed by the tasks set before him.

Who of us has not felt that fear in the night or early morning when our minds race through the seemingly insurmountable tasks of the day to come? These night worries often seem magnified in the season leading up to the celebration of the birth of our Lord. The extra tasks, responsibilities and obligations of the season seem overwhelming at the very time when our inner expectation is for the advent of joy, love and celebration, a Christmas card experience.

This Advent, let's change our fears of the burdens of the season and follow the Lord's message to Paul to put fear behind us and speak of the true meaning of the season—the coming of Christ. Let's not be silent. Let's say “no thank you” when tasks threaten to weigh us down. Let's share our excitement with all we come in contact with through a spirit of happy anticipation. Let's change our mission for this season by reaching out and speaking of our joy in the Advent season.

Prayer: Lord, help us to put the fears of the season behind us by listening to your comforting words, “Do not be afraid.” Help us to keep our eyes on the mission of sharing the joys of Advent with those around us and to never lose sight of the ever-miraculous promise of Christmas. In Jesus' name, Amen,

***“O Most High, when I am afraid.  
I put my trust in you.  
In God, whose word I praise,  
in God I trust: I am not afraid;  
what can flesh do to me?”  
Psalm 56:3-4***

It seems that everywhere we turn these days, we find something to bring fear to our hearts: destructive storms, devastating floods, damaging earthquakes, mysterious new diseases. We have also become increasingly fearful of the acts of other people (the “flesh” of Psalm 56): terrorist attacks, mass murders even in our most sacred spaces, national leaders who prefer confrontation to cooperation, politicians who seem able only to worsen problems rather than alleviate them. In the words of the W. B. Yates’ poem, *The Second Coming*, written nearly a century ago in the aftermath of World War I,

*Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world ...  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.*

Fear paralyzes us and interferes with our ability to see God in the midst of our turmoil. The psalmist’s words remind us this year, the Reformation’s 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary year, of the core Reformed principle that God is in charge, not humans, and we can rely on God’s grace and providence. When we are dominated by fear, it is hard for us to love, “but perfect love casts out fear...” (1 John 4:18).

Yates’ poem envisions the “rough beast ... slouching to Bethlehem to be born.” In contrast, the psalmist insists, “in God I trust.” Affirming our own trust in God with true conviction, let us not fear Yates’ beast. Let us rather, full of confidence in God’s mercy and abounding love this Advent season, eagerly anticipate celebrating God’s gift in the birth in Bethlehem of God’s Son, our Savior Jesus, the Christ.

Prayer: Merciful God, help us to remember that you are in charge, not we humans. Calm our fears, help us to put our trust in you, and open our hearts to respond in love of you and our fellow humans, Amen.

***“The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you;  
he will never leave you nor forsake you.  
Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.”  
Deuteronomy 31:8***

Crossroads, transitions and choices—this Scripture calls to mind events in my life on which I have prayed the Lord to lead me.

When as a West Coast girl I was married to an East Coast guy the decision on which Coast to live—after the Navy—became enormous!

Criss-crossing the country on job interviews, we were in a lonely motel somewhere in Texas when I called my long-time friend who was stationed with her husband at an Air Force base there. Through my tears she said the words “Follow your heart.” With that and prayers we returned to the East Coast. I knew God was telling me to find the courage and love to make a new life.

Through the years since I thank God everyday, not just for the BIG decisions but the small everyday ones too. Like the family of Jesus who were sometimes alone and afraid, I have learned to trust that God will not abandon me. This Advent message rings true for me.

Prayer: Gracious God we thank you for your guidance and love and pray that in the midst of our daily challenges, both big and small, we would turn to you for guidance and direction. In your son’s name we pray, Amen.

***“I have told you these things, so that you may have peace.  
In this world you will have trouble.  
But take heart! I have overcome the world.”  
John 16:33***

“What are you afraid of?” Is it the incredibly busy Christmas season that seems to have started in August and seems to start earlier every year? Is it your in-laws coming over for the Holidays? Is it all the things you have to do before Christmas Day or is it the start of the new year? Are you afraid of new changes at work, in your home, or your health?

You are not alone in your fear. Many of our most prominent biblical leaders have been afraid but they found peace in our God and Savior. Moses, the prophets, Peter, Paul and the rest of the disciples were all afraid at one time or another, even when in the midst of Our Savior, so you are not alone! Our Lord tells us to stay positive and not to worry, as he has overcome all that the world can throw at you!

What are you afraid of really? Are you afraid of totally and completely putting your faith and trust in the Lord and believing in the Peace he has to offer? If so, stop being afraid and quit worrying, for Christ conquers all! Believe that the peace of Christ will calm your soul and will give you rest. Believe that His peace will guide you and comfort you in your every day tribulation that He said comes with living in this world.

Prayer: Lord , let your Holy Spirit give me strength and courage to totally and completely believe in you and to accept the Peace you offer. Let your Peace keep me from fearing your will for me today and every day, Amen.

***“Surely God is my salvation;  
I will trust and not be afraid.  
The Lord, the Lord, is my strength and my song;  
he has become my salvation.”  
Isaiah 12:2***

This has been a difficult year of natural disasters such as hurricanes, earthquakes and tornados with incredible loss of human life as well as destruction of landscapes, buildings and homes. We have also watched newscasts of horrific violence here at home as well as across the world; violence perpetrated by individuals and groups both at random and targeted. With such a preponderance of disasters and violence occurring so frequently, it seems that we're not safe in our homes, churches, or streets. These events may leave each of us with an increased sense of vulnerability, a fear of strangers anywhere in our lives and the possibility of becoming more isolated in order to feel safe.

Isaiah also lived at a time of great violence and upheaval and has powerful words to share with us as we move through our days. The ability to remember our source of inner strength, to trust in God as our savior. To attend to God's voice, to sense his guidance, will allow us to pursue each day with strength and joy, and with his blessings, to share our strength with others. At this wonderful time of Christmas celebrations, remember Isaiah's words to trust in God, talk with him often and not be afraid as he will give us the power and strength we need to accomplish blessings in our days.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank you for the many blessings you bestow upon us each day. Help us to be strong in the many faces of adversity encroaching upon our lives today and to share our blessings and strengths with our neighbors during this wonderful season of Christmas and the many days that follow. In Christ's name, Amen.

*“a voice of one calling in the desert,  
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,  
make straight paths for him.’”  
Mark 1:3*

Many of us like to be prepared; we study for tests; we save a little bit for emergencies; we make lists and check things off; we have a plan and perhaps even a back-up plan. For some of us that is what makes us feel comfortable and in control. However there are those times when life takes an unexpected turn and we are completely unprepared—a sudden job loss; a health scare; the breakdown of a relationship; a tragedy. Things for which we could not have prepared. It is in those times in our lives that we can give in to our fears and our worries—when we can become overwhelmed and paralyzed, when it is easy to give up and give in. It is also in those moments that our faith can be tested—can we truly allow God to take control of these situations? Can we cast our cares and fears and worries on God? Can we trust in God’s promises? Undoubtedly it is hard.

John the Baptist was preaching at a time when the people were in search and need of a Messiah—they were living in fear and wanted hope and healing. John tells them of the one who will come—the one who God will send who will be the answer to their concerns and fulfill their needs. He told them to get ready, to prepare the way for the one to come. And that message still holds true today. We too need to get ready—and this preparation goes far beyond the rainy day fund or the shopping list for the holidays. It requires us to prepare our hearts and minds daily to again welcome Christ as our Lord and Savior. That’s what getting ready for Christmas is really about. Try to find time each day to meditate and pray on the great gift that God gave us in the person of Jesus Christ.

Prayer: Help us in these days to slow down and find time for you Lord. Help us to prepare our hearts and our homes for your birth so we might welcome you into our lives once again. Amen.

***“I will lie down and sleep in peace,  
for you alone, O Lord,  
make me dwell in safety.”  
Psalm 4:8***

Are you ever restless, anxious, or afraid? When you are; what do you do to restore peace in your life? Often, I struggle too long. I go to bed, sleep poorly, and wake up in the morning, restless and still struggling! Sometimes, I pray as I struggle. I pray that God will guide me and help me sleep. Sometimes I wake up in the morning with insights or solutions in my mind. I trust that God speaks to me in this way.

Imagine for a minute the restlessness Joseph and Mary might have experienced when they heard Angel’s voices:

“Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit...”

“Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now you will conceive in your womb and bear a Son...He will be called the Son of the Most High...”

I wonder; were Joseph and Mary restless, anxious, or afraid? Psalm 4:8 tells us: “I will both lie down and sleep in peace; For you alone, O Lord make me lie down in safety.” After the Angel’s visit, did Joseph and Mary “Sleep in peace?”

In Matthew’s Christmas story we learn that “...Joseph awoke from sleep” and “did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took Mary to be his wife.” In the book of Luke, Mary reveals finding peace in her beautiful Magnificat: “My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior...” I think that on that first Christmas, Joseph and Mary chose to trust in God, finding peace and safety amidst the turmoil.

Prayer: Loving God, help us turn to you in times of struggle. Help us live as Joseph and Mary modeled and trust in you that we might “both lie down and sleep in peace and safety.” Amen.

***“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything,  
by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving,  
present your requests to God.  
Philippians 4:6***

Scholars agree Paul wrote this letter from prison in Rome. Philipian Christians were being persecuted and although 2017 Christians in America are relatively blessed, we are in a time where we feel anxious and often are timid in our daily lives. In understanding this text it's important to distinguish between concern and worry. Concern causes us to act, anxiety keeps us from acting. Don't worry about being concerned: but be concerned about worrying.

Paul's message speaks to us in this regard and reminds us that praying and taking our worries to the Lord are how we keep worrying from interfering in our lives. Why is worry counterproductive? It doesn't solve our problems, it saps our energy, it doesn't hurry answers, and it interferes with our trust in God. The last point is perhaps the most important. Our worry is testimony that we're looking for worldly answers when our answer is trusting in the grace God gave us through his Son Jesus Christ. Worry never wins. Trusting God never fails!

To read more on this topic: [Matthew 6:25](#)

Prayer: Lord we confess we often worry about real and assumed things. We pray for understanding that in our times of need you are there for us. Give us strength in those times so that we might experience peace through your grace. In Jesus name, Amen.

***“Energize the limp hands,  
strengthen the rubbery knees.  
Tell fearful souls,  
“Courage! Take heart!  
God is here, right here,  
on his way to put things right  
And redress all wrongs.  
He’s on his way! He’ll save you!”  
Isaiah 35:3-4 (The Message)***

When you are so exhausted & discouraged that your hands don’t work and your legs threaten to buckle underneath you, you are in the place of the author of Isaiah 35. The Judaeen people were in exile, sent from their home to far-off Babylon. They were angry, defeated, and afraid. How could this happen? Where was God?

These are words we find ourselves saying on many occasions. How could these bad things happen to me? My family? My community? My world? Where, oh where are you, God?

And God, like the gentle parent who scoops us up when we have fallen and scraped our knees, will make everything all right, not by taking the scrapes and pain away, but by surrounding us with comfort and warmth and love. God’s “redressing” may not come in a form we want (revenge!) but it will come in a form we need, saving us from being alone and afraid, walking with us as we confront adversity, giving us courage to face the unfaceable. Where is God? Right here.

Prayer:: Dear God, when our hands are limp and our knees feel like rubber, give us strength and courage to face each new day. Help us to know that you will always be right here, saving us every day. Amen

***“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you.  
I do not give to you as the world gives.  
Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”  
John 14:27***

These are difficult times, fraught with antagonistic feelings and sometimes bitterly opposing points of view. Friends avoid certain topics in order to stay in connection. In my view this is a good thing. Connection is important.

We are blessed by the possibility of connection to a God who transcends bitterness and contention. God’s presence teaches, soothes and inclines our inner being towards love. His Spirit is a link to the peace that passes understanding. When we are upset or afraid, it is important to make time to connect with Him, rest in His presence, release our tension to Him and allow his love to reinvigorate us.

God came to us as a baby who grew to be a man who gave the ultimate sacrifice -not before sharing with his closest associates “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Do not let them be afraid. Not as the world gives, I give my peace to you.”

Prayer: Loving Father, help us to remember to connect with you when we are in difficult or frightening circumstances, to invite you to dwell within us and teach us how to be unafraid. Amen.

*“I will say of the Lord,  
‘He is my refuge and my fortress,  
my God, in whom I trust.’”  
Psalm 91:2*

During this Advent season, as we prepare for the most joyous holiday, the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are often stressed by dangerous conditions in the world. The news is overflowing with frightening and upsetting events that cause us to worry. It is easy for fear to make us lose our focus and sap the joy from this holy season. Anxiety and depression are all too common, especially around the holidays. Our bible tells us to find refuge in our God whom we love and trust. Remember that our Lord provides refuge and comfort in many ways. With the gift of life that God gives us comes all that is human: weakness, illness, mistakes and failures that try our souls. God gives us solace, strength and salvation from our pain and suffering through his son and our savior, Lord Jesus. When we trust in Him, he guides us and strengthens us by providing a refuge and fortress to help us overcome the losses and hurts that life throws our way. Strength comes through the knowledge that God loves us and provides a refuge from the daily strife that surrounds us. There is strength in the fortress of God’s love.

Prayer: Dear Lord God, please be our fortress, watch over us and give us strength and guidance to do what is right and to help one another through life’s difficulties.

*“Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.”*

*1 Peter 5:6-7*

Humbling ourselves or just being content with who we are is sometimes the hardest thing to do. Or, as I sometimes call it....”living in the moment”. It is easy to become caught up in our day-to-day schedules, lives, issues, and worries. Days, weeks, months go by and we are still spinning on the wheel of life, going nowhere. As a result, we are wringing out hands with worry over work, school and kids.

But God tells us to be humble. Patient. He will lift us up at the **right** time. To be honest, I chuckled when I read the side note for this part of the passage. How many times do we try to fit God’s plans in our own time schedule, our own right time? How many times have we clung to the problems at work, perhaps with our marriage, relationships or issues with our children? Too often, I suppose.

Still, God tells us to lay all of that ugly worry, anxiety and hurt on Him. To cast it upon Him, not only because He can handle everything we throw at Him, but because He loves and cares for us beyond our imagination. But, laying our burdens on Him can be hard. It is a control thing. As humans, we like to be in control and in the know. I call it for myself “baby steps”. Give God one thing, then the next will come easier, then the next. We just have to constantly remind ourselves God can handle it all.

This advent season, I hope you can join me by laying your burdens at God’s feet. Let Him be in control.

Prayer:: Dear Heavenly father, as we enter this wonderful season of Advent, we ask you to help us to be humble and content. To recognize You can handle all of our burdens and You will lift us up in your time. Help us to live in the moment, leaving our worries and focusing on You and the beautiful Gift you have given us in Jesus Christ. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

***“There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. <sup>7</sup>He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. <sup>8</sup>He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.”***  
***John 1:6-8***

One of my favorite movies is entitled “Rudy.” It’s the true story of young man from a small town in western Pennsylvania who dreams of beating all the odds and playing football for the Fighting Irish of the University of Notre Dame. He is shorter, not as strong, and less experienced than any of the other players, yet has as much heart and passion as anyone who ever played the game. He faces disappointment after disappointment in his attempts to get on the team, and eventually ends up in the office of an old and wise priest and unloads his entire story and asks for advice. With compassion and kindness the priest takes it all in. When Rudy is done talking the priest says, “Son there are two things I know for certain. There is a God. And I’m not him.”

Those words echo the words that John the Baptist speaks to us this week. He is saying, there is a God, a God who is the light of the world, a God who’s presence will pierce any darkness. Know with every ounce of your being that God is real, and that God is coming anew. But I am not him.

Prayer: Lord help us to watch and to wait. Help us to let go of any false gods or misplaced priorities, and place our faith and our trust in you, Amen.

*“I will praise the Lord, who counsels me;  
Even at night my heart instructs me.  
I have set the Lord always before me.  
Because he is at my right hand,  
I will not be shaken.”  
Psalm 16:7-9*

Luke 2: 8 “In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup>Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup>But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: <sup>11</sup>to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah,- the Lord.’”

Sometimes passages of scripture seem to hold a conversation with each other. In this final week before the festivities of Christmas day, we are in the midst of the ordinary demands that fill our time (watching our flocks) and the munificence that suffuses our lives as we decorate our homes, attend our parties and lunches, wrap and hide and deliver gifts, respond to our mailboxes full of requests for our support of causes from vast to mundane. We quake before the unexpected, the death, the illness, the dangers of the world, the alienation across political, religious, and cultural lines. Yet in the midst of this we are reminded that in the night, in the stillness, in the dark, when we pause, the Lord brings counsel to our hearts and angels bring tidings of great joy, for unto to us was born a babe, a savior, Christ, the Messiah, the Lord in our midst.

**Prayer:** Dear Lord, help me number the blessings of our lives and, amidst the frenzy of the season, to seek the quiet places where your love, manifest in the birth of your son, can instruct my heart, Amen.

*“There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in Love.”*

*I John 4:18*

There is a lot of fear in our society these days. Fear of those who are not like us, fear of war, fear for our economy. Fear can become our tormentor. It can keep us from resting in Christ. It can prevent us from loving our neighbors as we love our family, our friends, ourselves.

As you get ready for the celebration of Christ’s birth, I encourage you to examine your heart. Where is the focus of your energy, time and attention? Are you allowing fear to get in the way of truly loving others? Take time this advent season to reach out to those who might make you feel uncomfortable. You will be surprised to find how much more you have in common with them than you realized. God will do amazing things in your life if you open yourselves to people of other backgrounds, traditions, cultures, and faiths.

Prayer: Dear Lord, we know that loving our neighbors is one of your greatest commandments. Please help us to turn our focus to you and your message of love and grace this Holy season; in Christ’s name, Amen.

***“God is our refuge and strength,  
An ever-present help in trouble.  
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the  
mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though it’s waters  
roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging.”  
Psalm 46:1-3***

God and life have been very good to me for the past 80+ years. However, there have been times when I was not so sure of this fact. In 1960 I was the Headquarters Company Commander for the Second Battalion, Second Marine Division on a warship, The U. S. S. Cambria. We were at sea in the Caribbean awaiting orders to invade Cuba. Each night after dinner, I would go to the 03 level of that ship and pray to God for my safe return.

My wife, Sally, was pregnant and awaiting my return at Camp LeJeune, NC. God did bring me home safely, on January 15, 1961, and our first daughter was born on January 29, 1961.-----

“God is our refuge and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble.” That my Church family had taught me to pray and to remember this verse from the Psalms was a great blessing to me in those perilous times when “the hills are shaken by violence.”

Prayer: God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth be removed. God give me courage to face each day! Amen.

***“But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel; Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine.”  
Isaiah 43:1***

Our Advent journey is a wonderful time of preparation for the celebration of Christ’s birth as well as his life and resurrection in general. However, many of the recent events from this past year may make us fearful of the future and what it holds for us and our loved ones.

In Isaiah 43:1, God assures us that we have no reason to be afraid. God created us and will ultimately protect us from all evil and danger. Throughout the bible, God’s redemption provides deliverance from danger, oppression and captivity, just like the ancient Israelites were redeemed from their slavery in Egypt. God protected them and led them to the Promised Land.

As a result of this redemption, God calls us by our very own name and tells us that we belong to him, starting at our baptism, when we are marked as one of God’s children. As long as we remain one of God’s children, even as adults, God will always be present to redeem us.

Prayer: Loving God, we thank you for your calling and redeeming us. Help us to remember this as we venture through all the frantic events of the Advent season. Enable us to turn our focus to you, in Christ’s name, Amen.

*“The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear?  
The Lord is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be  
afraid?  
Psalm 27:1*

When I stop and think about it, I’m amazed how often I live in fear. My fears range from large to small: fear during my mother’s operation, fear of finding a job after a company I worked for closed, fear during an interview, fear of reading something I wrote in front of an audience. Some of these fears might be labeled “worry,” but worry is fear’s little brother, and letting either one overshadow my life has the same effect: my life is smaller, I don’t shine as brightly when I live in fear.

With Christmas around the corner, I’m reminded of the shepherds in the field receiving the news of Jesus’ birth, how they were afraid when the angel came to them. As I reflect on this scene, I realize fear is fueled by the unknown, by what I can’t understand. But there is an answer to that uncertainty. Knowing God replaces fear with trust. Nothing can harm me because loving God gives me strength to handle whatever comes my way. I may still worry about what lies ahead, but when I put my trust in God, my fears are tamed because I understand that God will guide me through the labyrinth of struggles and questions. He’s got my back!

Prayer: Loving God, remind us that fear only dims our light in the world and makes us less effective as we try to live by Your example. Help us to brave our fears and tackle our problems knowing you are there to guide us. Help us to trust in your word, and live our lives boldly in Your name. Amen!

***“Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself  
and God our Father, who loved us  
and through grace gave us eternal comfort  
and good hope, comfort your hearts  
and strengthen them in every good work and word.”  
2 Thessalonians 2:16-17***

During the holidays – we are steeped with tradition – the lights, the shopping, the cards and the infamous Christmas letter. But in all of the hoopla – we can miss the real message of how we should live spiritually and soundly. Is it about the indulgence of gifts for our families or the gift of time with our loved ones? Do we adorn our homes with flashing lights or do we light the hearts of those who may be alone or terrified in their own uncertain circumstances? Do we boast of our adventures and exploits or do we live each day graciously working through our faith?

In all the external display, the true reward is found in the small and genuine actions that are immeasurably rich and so thoroughly bring comfort to others and also to ourselves.

Prayer: May we give the gift of love and care this holiday through which we can comfort others, allaying their fears and strengthening their faith. May we enjoy the excitement of Christ’s birth while remembering all God has given us and be steadfast in his love and in doing such may we may extend his grace to others as the ultimate gift of comfort.

*“The time came for the baby to be born,  
and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son.  
She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger,  
because there was no room for them in the inn.”  
Luke 2:6-7*

I am sure that Jesus' earthly arrival into the world was not quite how Mary might have imagined it. And certainly it was not the calm and peaceful event that is so often depicted in our traditional Christmas carols and cards. It was probably pretty frightening for those young parents—far from home in a space with strangers all around. I suspect that Mary would have picked another option if she had been given the choice. But she was not given a choice! God had a plan. And as is so often the case we don't always have a choice in how God's plan unfolds in our lives either. The unexpected happens—both the good and the bad and we are often given very little warning. God's plan can sometimes be different from ours., and it can be hard for us to allow God's plan to take root in our lives, to trust that God's plan will ultimately be the better one.

This year I hope that through these devotions you have learned to trust a little bit more; to lay down some of your fears and your worries; to believe in God's promises. I hope that you have been able to embrace God's plan for your life the way that Mary and Joseph were able to embrace God's plan for theirs.

Prayer: Gracious God, as we once again marvel at the gift you gave to our world in the form of your Son born as one of us, be born anew in us this night, cast out our fears and worries and allow us to trust wholly in you, allow us to place our lives in your hands, now and always. Amen.

***“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”***

***John 1:1-5***

Christmas Day brings the astonishing news that God is revealed to us in Jesus Christ! Jesus is the imprint of God’s being and the reflection of God’s light and God’s glory. We are called by God to be bearers of that good news, instruments of that light and love. How does this news shape your self-awareness? How does it change the way that you live and the way that you love? May today not be the end of your celebration of the gift of God’s great love in Jesus Christ. May it be the beginning.

Prayer:

Eternal God, in the midst of strife and warfare,  
may your peace be made known throughout the world.  
As your church announces the good news of salvation,  
may we share the gift of Christ in prayer and action.  
In sickness, suffering, and need,  
may your healing love dispel all darkness.  
As all creation shouts with joy,  
may we care for the earth, sea, and sky in reverence of you.  
In all of our beginnings and all of our endings,  
may we be one with you forever. Amen.



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