

“The Viral Spread of Fear”

March 15, 2020

Psalm 23; Isaiah 43: 1-3; John 20: 19-23

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How many of you ventured out to the grocery store in the last couple of days? I went out on Friday and saw some of the chaos. They had staff waiting at the door with hand sanitizer, the place was packed, and there was no toilet paper to be found anywhere.

I really don't understand this rush on toilet paper! I've seen videos online with fights breaking out in grocery stores in the US over toilet paper. COVID-19 is spreading, there's no doubt. But what's spreading even faster is fear. As of this morning at 9 a.m. there isn't a single case of COVID-19 in Leeds-Grenville or Lanark Counties, and yet you can't find toilet paper in LGL Counties anywhere!

Do you remember the reality TV show Fear Factor? This was one of the original reality TV shows on in the early 2000s. They would put teams of people through a series of challenges. The challenges were always one of two kinds: they were either very adventurous, such as stunts you'd see in movies (for example they would have them hanging from helicopters flying through a city, and they had to grab certain things off of the tops of buildings; or in another one there were two speed boats driving at top speed side by side, and they had to jump from one to another); or they were extremely gross and disgusting (for example they had them eating live worms, or laying down in a bathroom filled with tarantulas).

I always used to say that Fear Factor was either a challenge I would pay money to do, or a challenge you couldn't pay me enough to do. But of course, that was the entire point of the show, they would put people into scary situations and watch them freeze up, and have their fear get the better of them, and this made for good TV.

But the truth is fear is a very serious thing. Over the last week we have seen the stock markets crash at a faster rate than we've ever seen. Fear has driven people to get into fights over toilet paper! And fear can lead to hatred as we've seen during this COVID-19 crisis.

There has been a wave of violence against Asian people. A few weeks ago, in London England, a 23-year-old from Singapore, named Jonathan Mok, was attacked by a group of men, who beat him viciously while yelling at him *“I don't want your Coronavirus in my country!”* Fear can paralyze you; fear can blind you; fear can deafen you; fear can make you

do things you'd never imagine yourself doing normally; fear can rule your life and stay with you for years. Fear can keep you from being the person you're meant to be in life.

Fear is also a barrier between us and God. As Christians we are taught to bring all of our anxieties and fears to God. When we have Christ in our hearts, Christ removes our fear. Here are a few examples of scripture that speak directly to fear:

1 Peter 5:7 *"Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you."*

Philippians 4:6-7 *"do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."* (That's a very important part – count your blessings! *"with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God"* when we're thankful, we are better able to hear God's voice.)

Romans 8:38-39 *"And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love."*

This year I've been reading the Bible in one year. To be honest, I'm not so much reading the Bible as I am listening to the Bible. I have an app on my phone, and every morning I listen to Bible scriptures and commentary. Technology is great isn't it? The one thing I've noticed is this: fear is a very common theme throughout the entire Bible. And the message is very clear. Time and time again, the message from God, and from Christ is this: *"Do not be afraid because I am with you."*

In Genesis 3 we see Adam and Eve eat the apple from the forbidden tree, and right away they are afraid. That's when it started. They were afraid about being naked, so they covered themselves. Then they heard God walking through the garden, and they were afraid, so they hid from him. That's when fear began.

In Exodus 3 when Moses was in exile and had a good life, God spoke to him through the burning bush and told him that he wanted him to go back to Egypt and free the Israelites. Moses was suddenly filled with fear, and said, *"Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh?"* and God replied, *"Do not be afraid, I will be with you."*

In 1 Samuel 17 is the story of David and Goliath. This is a great story about fear. In this story Israel is being invaded by the Philistines who not only have a huge army, but they also have Goliath, the biggest and greatest soldier in the world. The Israelites mobilized their army and moved out to meet the Philistines and held the top of a large ridge at the valley of Elah. The Philistines held the opposite ridge, effectively creating a stalemate. Then Goliath came out and challenged the Israelites to settle the battle with champions. King Saul, the King of Israel, offered a lot of gold for anyone in his army who would kill Goliath. No one came forward. He kept upping the ante, putting more and more gold on the table, and eventually he even offered up his daughter's hand in marriage. Still no one came forward. The entire army was petrified with fear.

Then David came forward and volunteered. He wasn't even a member of the army; he was a teenage shepherd at the time. But here's the thing – David had no fear. Why? Because David was a man who walked with God. David said to Saul, *"I will go and kill Goliath. If God has kept me safe from bears and tigers, he will keep me safe from this Philistine."* And you know the rest of the story. David walks out into the valley, and strikes Goliath dead with one rock fired from his sling. David had no fear because he walked with God. When you read the Psalms, you see David's absolute devotion to God. Psalm after Psalm, there's a constant theme: *"I am weak, but God, you are strong, and with you I have no fear."* One of my favourite verses in the Bible is Psalm 23:4 *"Yea thou I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."* I always wonder when David was writing Psalm 23, if he was thinking about the time he walked out into the valley of Elah to face Goliath.

Let's switch to the New Testament now. All through the New Testament, I get the feeling that Jesus was training his disciples to not be afraid. And time and time again, Jesus tells his disciples, *"do not be afraid"*.

In Matthew 8: 23-27 the disciples and Jesus are in a boat, and a massive storm suddenly blows in. Jesus is sleeping, but the disciples are filled with fear, and they wake Jesus up, and they say *"Lord save us! We're going to drown!"* Jesus replies, *"You of little faith, why are you afraid?"* Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm. A few chapters later in Matthew 14:22-34, Jesus sends his disciples on ahead to sail across the lake. Later on, Jesus walks out on the water to meet them, and when the disciples see him they are filled with fear because they think they're seeing a ghost. Jesus says, *"Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."* Then Peter gathers some courage and asks if he

can walk out on the water to meet Jesus, and Jesus says, “*come.*” So Peter walks out, and he’s doing it! He’s walking on water! “But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, ‘*Lord save me!*’” So Jesus walked over, grabbed Peter by the hand and said, “*You of little faith, why did you doubt?*”

The big test for the disciples came when Jesus was arrested. I always found it interesting that during the entire time that Jesus is arrested, tried, tortured, and crucified that the disciples are nowhere to be seen. They all ran and hid because they were filled with fear.

Peter, to give him some credit, at least tried to get close to Jesus on the night he was arrested. He followed at a distance to the High Priest’s house and sat down at a fire in the courtyard with some of the guards. But then a woman recognized him, and said, “*aren’t you one of them?*” Peter was instantly filled with fear, and denied Christ, and went on to deny him three times in total.

After Christ rose from the dead, the disciples were still huddled in fear. In the scriptures it describes the disciples in houses and rooms “*with the doors locked.*” In John 20:19-23 it says they were hiding for fear of the “*Jewish leaders.*” Then Jesus appeared to them and said: “*Peace be with you.*” Then he breathed on them, filling them with the Holy Spirit, and instantly their fear was gone. He told them to go out and spread the news of his resurrection, and they did! Their fear was completely gone, it had evaporated. They left their locked houses and went out to the world and started preaching and spreading the word that Christ is alive and had risen from the dead.

And Christ does this for us as well. If we allow him into our hearts, he fills us with the Holy Spirit and takes away our fear. When we walk with Christ, when we have Christ in our hearts, he comforts us. We have nothing to fear.

And remember that fearing something in the world is nothing new. When I was chatting with my dad yesterday, he was telling me about what it was like growing up during the Cold War in Ottawa, and how his school held regular drills to hide under their desks, or to go and sit in the basement and wait for a nuclear bomb to drop. The world back then was filled with fear. Pastor Kim put a great quote on her Facebook page from C.S. Lewis:

“If we are all going to be destroyed by an atomic bomb, let that bomb when it comes find us doing sensible and human things — praying, working, teaching, reading, listening to music, bathing the children, playing tennis, chatting to our friends over a pint and a game of darts—not huddled together like frightened sheep and thinking about bombs. They may break

our bodies (any microbe can do that) but they need not dominate our minds.”

During this COVID-19 crisis, let's do our part: wash your hands; don't touch your face; avoid public gatherings; but most importantly, don't be afraid! Have no fear! God is with us! We will get through this. Spend time with loved ones and enjoy. Check on your elderly neighbours. Let's all pull together. But never forget, God is with us!

Let me close with one of my favourite pieces of scripture: from Isaiah 43:1-3. *“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. Do not be afraid, for I am with you.”*

Thanks be to God, Amen.