

Sermon

Sunday, March 24, 2019

Charleston, SC

8:00 am & 10:30 am Sermon ~ Numbers 21:4-9. John 3:5-17

Fear is a Liar

The Rev. Al Zadig, Jr.

Fear is a liar. I have proof. In this story, a mother tucks her young son into bed during a severe thunderstorm. She's about to turn off the light when the boy asks in a trembling voice, "Mommy, please sleep with me all night." Smiling, the mother says, "No, honey, I can't." "Why?" asks the boy. The mother looks tenderly at her son and says, "I have to sleep in Daddy's room." The son looks at the mom in disillusionment and says, "That big sissy!"

Fear is a liar. But I do have to give a disclaimer. There is a good form of fear and a bad form of fear. The good kind of fear is that fear that alerts you to danger. For example, you're walking across the street and you see there is a car driven by someone on the phone, distracted. They are about to go through a red light, and that fear backs you up to the curb and thank God! That fear saved your life! Something I witnessed when looking out my window while writing this sermon!

Good fear can also describe a reverence for God, in fearing, respecting, and honoring Him. Yes this "good fear," as Proverbs 9 says, "is the beginning of wisdom." That's good fear.

But, the bad fear, the bad fears are lies, the kinds of lies that wake you up at 3am. False fears in the form of untruths such as worry, shame, and anxiety. Yes, Satan specializes in delivering these false fears, especially at that 3am hour. In fact, it's why we read in 1 John that perfect love casts out that bad fear! This kind of false fear is like sitting in a rocking chair - it gives you something to do, but gets you nowhere.

How can you know the difference? Here is the truth of the matter. Good fear is fear that leads you into the arms of God. Bad fear is fear that leads you away from God.

This bad lying fear is all over the books of Exodus and Numbers. The Jews, fearing for their lives, over and over yell out, "God where's my food and water? God, where are we going? God, where is Moses?" It sounds like an exhaustive broken record!

Some years ago, I was driving my brand-new, used car down to Florida on I-95 when a rain storm comes out of nowhere. Most cars slow down except a mini-van that passes me, then hydroplanes right in front of me. It spins, doing 360s, flips over, and slides through the grassy median on its roof. I pull over, and thank God no one is hurt. By God's grace, the sheriff arrives and as we're talking, we hear two other cars hit each other on the highway and start hydroplaning, to which the very southern sheriff looks at me and says, "Here we go again!" As soon as he says that, one of those careening cars smashes directly into my new used and parked car.

Here we go again! Like a broken record, the Israelites just keep repeating the same fearful, faithless behavior! Just last week, David Booman preached on Numbers 13: Fear overtaking the faith of the Jews. Who can forget that one line from the reading, "We explored a new land and we were like grasshoppers compared to those giants." Lies, all lies, fearful fuddy-duddy lies.

Now between last week's chapter 13 and today's chapter 21, here we go again, their fear would only increase. The King of Edom refuses to allow the Jews to pass through his territory. The King of Arad rejects the Jews from being able to walk through his Kingdom. The people rebel against Moses and Aaron, grumbling-grumbling-grumbling. Then Moses's own leaders rebel against Moses! And then Aaron, the Chief of Staff serving Moses, dies! "We're all going to die!" shout the

Jews. And their faithless fear goes through the roof!

So Chapter 21 begins in that fear filled place. Fear that would turn to panic in the last and worst episode for the Jews in the wilderness. They yell out against Moses AND God. Where is our daily provision of food and water? No more of this worthless fake food you call manna. No bread! No water! Just miserable food! Fear turning to faithless panic.

God is sick and tired of it and would have no more of it. Which leads God to send snakes into the camp, snakes that would kill many of the Jews. This violent response to fear and sin leads people today to say what I hear so frequently: "The God of the Old Testament is too violent. I like a nice loving God, the one I see in the New Testament."

My friends, here is what you need to know about God. God hates sin. That has and never will change. God is the same God, yesterday, today, and tomorrow. God hates our fearful disobedience and sin. God-Hates-Sin. Why? Because it is the very antithesis of His nature, and because sin always leads us to a place of fear, which then separates us from God, and then prevents us from stepping out in faith! Which means, Satan loves a fearful Christian! Sin leads to Fear, and always brings separation. It was sin-turned-fear that caused Adam and Eve to run away from God and hide "among the trees of the garden"

Bottom line: God hates sin and fear because it keeps us from a relationship with him!

Okay, back to verse six. Many Jews would die from snake bites, a perfectly horrible death! Those snakes produce in the other Jews a holy fear, reverence, and respect, and even repentance. The Jews go to

Moses post haste and say, "We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and you. Pray that God will take the snakes away from us." Moses prays to God, and God acts.

Just for a moment try to put yourself into the shoes of Moses. What a rollercoaster it was leading these fearful people. Talk about needing a pay raise! In the words of DL Moody, "Moses spent 40 years in Egypt thinking he was a somebody, 40 years in the desert learning he was a nobody, and 40 years leading the Jews out of the desert, discovering what God can do with a nobody!"

God gives Moses a solution. He orders Moses to make a snake of bronze, lift it up on a pole, and when people look at the snake on the pole, they would live. Moses obeys and people would be saved, proving that God's hatred of their sin, as great as it was, is still less than His love for them. His love for them is still greater than his hatred of their sin and faithless fear. For now, and in their repentance, the Jews are essentially saying, "God, You are Lord over my fear."

Bad fear leads us into isolation and deepest sin, a fear that lies. Good fear leads us into the arms of God. As we apply this to our lives, let me ask you, what is your biggest fear? Maybe you're right there with the Jews, worried about your future, your provision, or the relationships in your life. The question is, is your fear leading you into, or away from, the arms of your loving God?

Or maybe you are fearful of committing to God because you don't know what He's going to do through you. Maybe, just maybe, your fear is more like the fear of Nicodemus from the Gospel of John. Nicodemus was a wealthy man, and a Jew who followed the tradition to the 't'. He was in a special league of 6,000 Jews called Pharisees, men who had dedicated their lives to observe every iota of the Scribal law. Nicodemus was also part of the Sanhedrin, a court of 70 men serving as their Supreme Court, with religious jurisdiction over every Jew and how they must keep the law. Tradition for Nicodemus had become his faith. Yet he was a man who knew there was something hollow inside. Embarrassingly to Nicodemus, there was a homeless preacher whose words were oddly resonating in his heart. Nicodemus has to

meet this Jesus, but oh his fear, what if members of his family, or the court found out? This giant of a man going to this nobody?

It turns out to be a good fear because it leads Nicodemus to Jesus. A good fear because he's asking all the right questions. What if my traditions are just that, traditions? What if Jesus is the real deal? Jesus looks at Nicodemus and says, "Nicodemus, unless you're born again, you can never get to heaven." Meaning your heart, soul, and desires need to change, something empty religious traditions will never accomplish! And this strikes both a holy and an unholy fear in Nicodemus, who replies, "How can this be?" Jesus says Nick, you know everything about the Old Testament except one thing, I AM the fulfiller of the Old Testament. Which is when Jesus gives the A-Ha Moment. Referring back to Numbers 21, Jesus says, "Nicodemus, remember when God raised up that snake through Moses, and saved people from physical death when they looked at it? I, Jesus will be lifted up, and when people look up at me and turn their hearts to me, and believe I am the fulfiller of all the laws and traditions, they will be saved! Just as the Jews were physically healed by looking up at that bronze snake made and lifted up on a pole by Moses, Jesus, lifted on that cross, gives eternal life to all who look up to him and believe. As we lift our eyes to Jesus and believe, we receive physical healing for this life, healing from our fears and sins, and also eternal life in Christ. His love for us is greater than His hatred of our sin and fear. It also tells us God doesn't always remove the snakes, sins, fears, and temptations in our lives, but He arranges a way for us to be saved from them, through His Son, lifted on that Cross. That's why we sing Lift High the Cross. The Cross is God's way of providing our healing from sin's deadly bite.

Hear that again: I, Jesus will be lifted up, and when people look upon me and turn their hearts to me and believe I am the fulfiller of all the laws and traditions, they will be saved! The words Jesus says next would go viral: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him will never die but have everlasting Life.

God didn't send Jesus into the world to condemn it but to save it." Doesn't this melt our fear and cause us to Love Jesus for who He is even more?

You know, in a way, Nicodemus is in the same boat as the Jews. He has a choice to make. Would a good and holy fear bring him to look up and believe to save his life? Or would an earthly lying fear of embarrassment and hurt pride lead him away from Jesus? Back to you. Is your fear leading you into the arms of Jesus or away from Him?

Finally this morning, the tug of war between the lying bad fear and the good fear can become a real struggle. One of our parishioners is in that struggle right now. She was diagnosed with spinal cancer several weeks ago, and that's when that lying fear set in.

She's in Charleston largely alone, not a lot of family here, and as I visited her a couple of days ago, I could physically feel that lying fear. It was tangible, and understandable. Yet it was a fear that was lying to her. A fear that said, "There is no hope. No one to take care of you. You're all alone. You don't matter." Fear is such a liar. But by God's grace, before I arrived in her room, a nurse picks up on her fear. Without saying a word, the nurse takes a piece of paper and writes what fear really stands for: F-False, E-Evidence, A-Appearing, R-Real. That piece of paper is pictured inside your bulletin front cover.

Now, the antidote for fear, the opposite of fear is FAITH. Faith standing for: F-Forsaking, A-All, I-I, T-Trust, H-Him. Forsaking that lying fear, forsaking my sin, forsaking temptation, forsaking embarrassment. Fear is a liar. My friends, come back into the arms of God. Look up, surrender, believe, and step out!