

Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, April 19, 2020

HAVE NO FEAR

Luke 12:4-7

COVID-19 is not the only virus running wild in the world today. In addition to the coronavirus pandemic, there is a pandemic of fear which has been caused by the coronavirus, but which transcends it. The fear of COVID-19 is new, but there is nothing new about fear.

The Bible has much to say about fear, about what and when to fear, and when to “fear not!” For starters today, I want to read a brief passage – just four verses – from the Gospel of Luke in which Jesus speaks to His followers about what to fear and what not to fear. Let’s give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God’s holy Word from Luke 12:4-7.

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You either already know or it probably won’t surprise you to learn that the New Testament (Greek) word for “fear” is *phobos*, which is used 46 times in the New Testament. This is where our English word “phobia” comes from. The verb “to fear” or “to be afraid,” *phobeomai*, is used 94 times in the New Testament, often in the form of a command such as “Fear not!” or “Don’t be afraid!”, in many cases from an angel or from Jesus Himself.

Technically, a phobia is an extreme, exaggerated, irrational fear of or aversion to something that interferes with a person’s quality of life. A “phobia” differs from “fear” in both degree and its effect on a person’s ability to function normally. Fear itself is a normal part of life in this world and can be either a friend or an enemy, depending on what we fear and the impact it has on our lives.

There is seemingly an endless list of phobias identified by psychologists. Some are much more rational than others. *Chiroptophobia* is the fear of bats. That seems pretty rational, especially these days. *Didaskaleinophobia* is the fear of going to school. That may or may not be rational, depending on the circumstances. *Ophidiophobia* is the fear of snakes. I’ll own up to this one, for biblical reasons (see Genesis 3 and Numbers 21) and because snakes just give me the willies. *Glossophobia* is the fear of speaking in public, which is one of the most common of all fears among adults. Not a fear that someone in my position can afford to have! *Pedalophobia* is the fear of bald people. I hope none of you suffers from the fear of bald people!

Do you recall the conversation between Lucy and Charlie Brown in *A Charlie Brown Christmas*? It’s a classic. Lucy has put her shingle out, offering psychiatric help for five cents. Charlie Brown is down in the dumps and comes to Lucy for advice. Showing off her knowledge, Lucy says: “Are you afraid of responsibility? If you are, then you have hypengyophobia.”

“I don’t think that’s quite it,” says Charlie Brown.

Lucy: “How about cats? If you’re afraid of cats, you have ailurophasia.”

CB: “Well, sort of, but I’m not sure.”

Lucy: “Are you afraid of staircases? If you are, then you have climacaphobia. Maybe you have thalassophobia. This is fear of the ocean. Or gephyrophobia, which is the fear of crossing bridges. Or maybe you have pantophobia. Do you think you have pantophobia?”

CB: “What’s pantophobia?”

Lucy: “The fear of everything.”

CB: “That’s it!”

Do you have pantophobia? Probably not. But we all suffer from fears of one kind or another. Not phobias, necessarily. But fears that are real, fears that cast a long shadow in our lives, fears that drain us of energy and hope. You may not have any of the phobias I’ve mentioned, but you may struggle with the fear of failure or rejection. You may be afflicted with the fear of what other people think. You may suffer from FOMO – the fear of missing out on something. You may suffer from the fear of what might happen in the future. Another name for that is worry.

The thing is: God – your Heavenly Father – does not want you to live in fear. Your Heavenly Father does not want you to be weighed down or hemmed in or paralyzed by fears of any kind. Some fears are healthy, of course – like the fear of getting burned by putting your hand on a hot stove. But fearfulness is not an attribute God wants us to cultivate. It is not a fruit of the Holy Spirit.

We live in perilous times. We live in fearful times. There is a new phobia gripping the world today. I don’t know if it’s a “thing” or not, but I’m calling it “coronaphobia:” the fear of COVID-19. We fear the coronavirus because of what we have seen it do. This invisible enemy has caused or been a contributing factor in the deaths of nearly 40,000 Americans now and in excess of 700,000 persons worldwide, probably a lot more. It has brought immense grief and loss to millions. It has caused mandatory separations from people we love, family members who mean the world to us. It has been the cause of tremendous harm to our national and world economies. It has resulted in the temporary or permanent loss of millions of jobs in our country. It has left millions of people vulnerable both physically and financially. No wonder there is a pandemic of fear.

What we fear most of all in this coronavirus is its power to kill. What most people fear above all is death. So we will do almost anything to avoid it. We will go to great lengths to sustain and prolong life, whether because we fear dying or, in the case of loved one, because we do not want the separation death brings.

Jesus tackled the topic of death head on with His disciples in Luke 12. This conversation took place in the larger context of the Pharisees' opposition to Jesus and their desire to catch Him saying something they could use against Him (Luke 11:53), because they (the Pharisees) had come to the conclusion it was either them or Jesus. And they weren't about to give up the perks of their privileged position. Jesus knew what was in the Pharisees' hearts. He knew how hostile they were and the lengths to which they would go first to get rid of Him and then to silence His followers. But Jesus was not afraid. And He did not want His disciples to live in fear.

Listen again to these verses in Luke 12, this time from *The Message* paraphrase. Jesus says: "I'm speaking to you as dear friends. Don't be bluffed into silence or insincerity by the threats of religious bullies. True, they can kill you, but *then* what can they do? There's nothing they can do to your soul, your core being. Save your fear for God, who holds your entire life – body and soul – in His hands.

"What's the price of two or three pet canaries? Some loose change, right? But God never overlooks a single one. And He pays even greater attention to you, down to the last detail – even numbering the hairs on your head! So don't be intimidated by all this bully talk. You're worth more than a million canaries" (Luke 12:4-7, *MSG*).

Jesus speaks directly here to the fear of dying – in particular, the fear of dying at the hands of enemies of our faith. Christians are not being killed for our faith here in America, but it happens routinely in other countries, even systematically in some places in the world. I am in awe of the courage and faith of men and women, young and old, who have been martyred for the faith in our own time and since the beginning of the church. I pray for the same courage and fidelity to the truth of the gospel, if it is ever required of me to suffer persecution or death for the sake of Christ.

"Courage," you must understand, "is not the absence of fear. It is," as Nelson Mandela said, "the triumph over it." It is the willingness to act in the face of fear. We see countless acts of courage in times of war, in fires and floods and other natural disasters. We see it day after day in the devotion and sacrifice of health care workers on the front lines in the war against COVID-19. We see it in all who keep the peace. We see it in those who put themselves at risk to enable us to get the food and other goods and services we need to sustain our lives. It is not the absence of fear, but action in spite of it, which results in a triumph over fear.

Doesn't it seem natural to fear those who have the power to kill us? *It is* natural. *It is* normal. But Jesus says we should "not be afraid of those who kill the body and then can do no more" (12:4). If this life is all there is, and if preserving this life is what ultimately matters most, then we *should* fear those who seek to take our lives. Absolutely! But this life is *not* all that matters. There is more to life than this life. Last Sunday was Easter. In His resurrection, Jesus proved demonstrably that death is not the end of the story. Death does not have the ultimate power or the last word. When this life ends in death – as it will for each one of us, unless Jesus comes back first – there will still be more to the story of your life and mine. Through faith in Jesus, we have the promise of a home in heaven with all of God's redeemed people, and the sure and certain hope of our resurrection to eternal life. Which means, for us, that

death has lost its sting. It still happens. And it still hurts to be separated from those we love (and who love us). But Jesus has won the victory over death for us (1 Corinthians 15:54-57).

So, Jesus says, we need not fear death. We need not fear those who would ever seek to kill us. We need not live in mortal fear of anything that might cause our death. Why? Because nothing can separate us from God's love for us. Not even death itself. Jesus has given us proof in His death and resurrection that He is stronger than death.

None of this is to say that we should act carelessly or foolishly or selfishly in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. As followers of Christ, as good citizens of this nation and good neighbors, it is incumbent on us to act prudently, thoughtfully, lovingly, and generously, looking out for the best interests of others, and seeking to help one another in the church and community as we are able. We are to take care of ourselves and our families, and do what we can to help others get through this trying time. We are to observe social distancing guidelines.

But we are not to fear death. Which means, we are not to live in mortal fear of the coronavirus or anything else (such as cancer or other disease) that may threaten our lives. What Jesus wants you to understand is that death is not the worst thing that can possibly happen to you. Or to me. Desmond Tutu, the South African Anglican bishop who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984 for his tireless efforts to bring an end to apartheid in South Africa, said of his opponents in the fight against apartheid: "What is it that they can ultimately do? The most awful thing they can do is to kill me, and death is not the worst thing that could happen to a Christian." (Quoted in Richard Schmidt, *Glorious Companions: Five Centuries of Anglican Spirituality*, 328.)

What is the worst thing that could happen to a Christian? The worst thing that could happen to anyone who professes to be a follower of Christ would be to renounce their faith, to reject the Savior, and, in turn, to be rejected by God on the day of judgment. But that will not happen to anyone who truly trusts in Jesus Christ and His saving work alone. That will not happen to anyone whose life is marked by His saving grace.

The worst thing that can happen to anyone is to die in a state of unbelief and rebellion against God. The worst thing that can happen to you or to anyone is to leave this world and go into eternity without a saving relationship with God, a saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Please do not let that happen. Do not think that you have plenty of time to get right with God. Maybe you do. But none of us knows when the day of our death will come. What I do know is that every day you live, every morning you wake up, brings you one day closer to your death. And if you wait until it's too late to come to Jesus, it will be too late forever. Please do not let that happen. Come to Jesus in trusting faith today. Let Him make you new on the inside. Ask Him for the gift of faith to believe in Him, and for both the desire and the power of His Spirit at work in you to follow Him from now on. Will you do that right now? Right where you are? Will you let me, or someone in your family, or a Christian friend you trust, know of your decision by God's grace to trust and follow Jesus?

For anyone who knows Jesus as Savior and Lord, who has been saved by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone, death *is* the worst thing that can happen to you. But for Christians, death is just the prelude to life everlasting.

Listen to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor and theologian who was arrested by the Gestapo in 1943 for his involvement in a plot to assassinate Hitler and subsequently imprisoned at one of the Nazi concentration camps. He was executed in April 1945, just a few days before the Allies liberated the concentration camp. As he was being taken away to be hanged, he said: “This is the end – for me, the beginning of life.” Bonhoeffer knew – by faith – that the end of this mortal life is not the end. It is, in a beautiful, triumphant sense, just the beginning – the beginning of a life in the presence of God with which the very best of life on this earth cannot even begin to compare. How do we know this? “We live by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7). We know it by trusting in the Word of God and the God whose Word it is. We know it because Jesus rose again from the dead and promised that because He lives, we will live also (John 14:19).

What I want you to know today is that Jesus does not want you to fear death. He does not want any of us to fear death. He wants you to trust Him with all your heart in life and in death. He does not want you to fear what the coronavirus or cancer or a heart attack or persecution or trouble or setbacks of any kind may bring,

What Jesus does advise, if I may put it this way, is that you and I “fear God without being afraid of Him” (Darrell Bock, *Luke: The NIV Application Commentary*, 339). You can fear God without being frightened of Him. You can treat Him with the honor and reverence and awe without living in fear of Him. The Bible says that for those who live in unbelief or who actively oppose God, “it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Hebrews 10:31). But if you know and trust and love and follow Jesus, you need not fear God’s judgment. Hell is not your destination. You have the promise of a home in heaven.

In verses 6 and 7, Jesus uses two very ordinary analogies to show how much God thinks of you and me: 1) sparrows; and 2) the number of hairs on your head.

I don’t know what the going rate for sparrows or canaries is. (I should have asked Mike and Nohemi if they know ☺.) What is clear from Jesus is that they were a dime a dozen (or something like it) in the 1st century.

Paul Tripp points out that scientists estimate that in the US alone, 13.7 million birds die every day. Isn’t that astonishing? And yet, as Jesus says of the sparrows, “not a single one of them is forgotten by God” (12:6). There are billions and billions of birds in existence around the world today, way more than the most devoted ornithologists could ever keep up with. But their Creator (and ours) knows them. As Tripp says, God is in control of every aspect of their lives: their birth; the color and quantity of their feathers; their nest; their breeding; their migration; and, ultimately, the time, location, and manner in which they die. (Tripp, “Wednesday’s Word,” www.paultripp.com, April 15, 2020.)

God knows it all. He knows them all. But the point Jesus wants to hit home with us is how much more valuable you and I are to Him than millions, even billions of birds. You were made in the image of God. You are the object of God's redeeming love. He did not spare His own Son, but freely gave Him up. For whom? For us (Romans 8:32). He knows you. He loves you. He is with you, and will be with you always, even when you are approaching death's door.

Notice also what Jesus says about the number of hairs on your head. He says that God knows exactly how many hairs you have. (He even knows what your natural hair color is!) Did you know that people with natural blonde hair have an average of 150,000 hairs on their head? People with brown hair average 110,000. People with black hair average about 100,000. Redheads average 90,000. Why the differences? I don't know.

What matters most is not what color your hair is or how many hairs you have, but the fact that God cares enough about you and me to know the smallest details about us. He knows way more about each of us than we know about ourselves (Leon Morris, *The Gospel of Luke: Tyndale NT Commentaries*, 210).

With such a loving Father, with such a gracious Savior, it is God's will that you and I have no fear. God does not want you to live in fear. In life or in death.

When you fall prey to fear, as we all do, take to heart the words of David in Psalm 56:3-4 and put them to work in your life. David prayed:

When I am afraid, I will trust in You.
 In God, whose word I praise,
 In God I trust;
 I will not be afraid.
 What can mortal man do to me?

Fight fear – whatever fears you may have in these fearful days – with a living, growing, persevering, personal trust in our great God and Savior.

Lord, let it be so in us, now and always. Amen.