

“Freedom from Fear”

“So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.”

Stockbridge, Massachusetts is a beautiful village in the Berkshire Mountains that has been the home of two famous citizens: Arlo Guthrie, who immortalized Alice’s Restaurant in his well-known song (*“Walk right in, it’s around the back; just a half a mile from the railroad track”*) and Norman Rockwell, the American illustrator whose paintings were featured in the *Saturday Evening Post*. While Alice’s Restaurant is no longer in Stockbridge (although there is another restaurant at its location), Norman Rockwell’s legacy lives on in the museum that bears his name on the outskirts of the village. Among its most famous paintings is a series entitled *Four Freedoms*, which was inspired by US President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s speech of that name that he delivered to the US Congress on January 6, 1941. FDR laid out four freedoms that are essential rights for every human being:

- Freedom of speech
- Freedom of worship
- Freedom from want
- Freedom from fear

Roosevelt’s speech became the inspiration for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that was adopted by the fledgling United Nations in 1948. The Declaration states that all human beings *“have the right to live in a peaceful and orderly society so that these rights and freedoms can be protected ...”* For Roosevelt, the fourth freedom – freedom from fear – had concrete implications for a world that was descending into a second global war:

- “The fourth freedom is freedom from fear, which, translated into world terms, means a world wide reduction of armaments to such a point and in such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbor – anywhere in the world.”

Freedom from fear is the fundamental message of the Word of God, the Word that *“charms our fears and bids our sorrows cease.”* (ELW Hymn 886). The phrase “fear not” or “do not be afraid” appears numerous times in both the Old and New Testaments, rooted in the message of hope in the steadfast, eternal presence of God:

- “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.
- “With the LORD at my side I do not fear. What can mortals do to me? – Psalm 118:6.
- “But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid, for see – I bring you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.’ – Luke 2:10-11.
- “But the angel said to the women, ‘Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said.’” – Matthew 28:5-6.
- “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.” – 1 John 4:18.

As Jesus commissions his disciples to continue his ministry of proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom of God, he is aware that faithful proclamation and practice of the gospel will inevitably put the disciples on a collision course with the powers of this world. The fact that *“a disciple is not above the teacher”* is a bit of proverbial wisdom that Jesus here transforms into a foundational principle of Christian discipleship. Since only Jesus can be understood as Teacher (*“But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students.”* – 23:8), Jesus’ saying refers concretely to the Christian’s relation to him. “Servant” and “Lord” likewise portray the relation of the Christian to Jesus. Matthew underscores the parallel between Jesus and the disciple to whom he entrusts his mission. As he has been persecuted, likewise will they; for *“if they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!”* (10:25). As Jesus did not retaliate to those who wished him harm but withdrew (*“But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him. When Jesus became aware of this, he departed.”* – 12:14-15), so also the disciple is not to respond to hostility in kind or with prayers of vengeance, but is to withdraw and continue his mission elsewhere in the glad confidence that the coming of the Son of Man will bring the Kingdom of God to full reality:

- *“But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, ‘Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.’”* – Luke 10:10-11

Jesus continually emphasizes the parallels between the disciples’ lives and his, including sharing the same fate of rejection and persecution. This includes the charge of working by the power of “Beelzebul,” the Devil, directing first to Jesus and then to his disciples:

- *“But the Pharisees said, ‘By the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.’”* – 9:34.
- *“[Jesus said] if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your own exorcists cast them out? ... But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you.”* – 12:27-28.

To these disciples who will experience such rejection and persecution and who may be afraid to speak out boldly for their new faith, Jesus offers words of comfort and assurance that they should *“have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known.”* (10:26). Jesus gives three reasons why the disciple, contrary to all appearances, can find courage to fulfill Jesus’ commission despite the very real threats to their existence and ministry:

1. The judgment that is to come will make everything public, so attempting to keep one’s faith private is ultimately futile. The Christian message is to be publicly proclaimed and lived out by the disciples, not kept to themselves as private religion. As *“no one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house”* (5:15), so are the disciples to *“tell in the light”* and *“proclaim from the housetops”* the gospel that has been entrusted to them.
2. The coming judgment of God which can “destroy the soul” is more to be feared than the present judgments of human courts, which can only harm the body. *“Encouragement lies in the awareness that it is ultimately God with whom we have to deal, not a theory about our own souls.”* (M. Eugene Boring).
3. God is the faithful creator who, however it may appear, cares for each creature: *“Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall the ground unperceived by your Father ...*

So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.” (10:29, 31). The one who created the heavens and the earth “still preserves my body and soul [and] protects me against all danger and shields and preserves me from all evil.” (Small Catechism). The disciples’ freedom from fear is rooted in the steadfast love and trustworthiness of God; their call is to “strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” (6:33).

- “God knows and cares even for the sparrows that are sold ‘two for a penny.’ God knows even the hairs of our heads better than we do. The threat of violence and death are real concerns for the disciples, but no longer the determining force in their lives, for the one who has ultimate power over our whole being exercises that power with mercy and love.” – Stanley Saunders.

The fears that we are facing in our current circumstances may be different from the forces that filled the disciples’ hearts with fear, but they are fears that can be just as debilitating and threatening to our bodily health as well as the health of the mission that Christ has entrusted to us. Many medical experts have noted that the health risks from anxiety and depression can have dire consequences that are in many ways as dangerous as the coronavirus that has redefined and disrupted our world. The Anxiety and Depression Association of Canada has noted that *“capsized travel plans, indefinite isolation, panic over scarce resources, and information overload could be a recipe for unchecked anxiety and feelings of isolation.”* Uncertainty over the long-term consequences of the virus, the economic impact of extended shutdowns, and the way in which our communities will function in the wake of the pandemic has led to many “dark nights of the soul” that are filled with fear and doubt. Churches that have remained physically separated may experience anxiety over whether they will be able to return to the ways things were before the pandemic, whether they will be able to survive the loss of revenue, and how they might proclaim the Gospel in a world that has been shaken to its foundations due to this difficult season. As Martin Luther King Jr. noted in response to the anxiety of his times, *“in these days of catastrophic change and calamitous uncertainty, is there any man who does not experience the depression and bewilderment of crippling fear, which, like a nagging hound of hell, pursues our every footstep?”*

Jesus never promises us a life that is free from fear, any more than he promises that Christian will not face the same rejection and persecution that he endured for the sake of the Gospel. But what our Lord *does* promise is that fear is not the last word, that anxiety is not the inevitable outcome of life with Christ, but that in the end the love of God that is ours in Jesus Christ overcomes all fear; for *“there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear”* (1 John 4:18). Our freedom from fear comes in our sure and certain knowledge that *“though the wrong seems oft so strong God is the ruler yet.”* As Christ overcame all that sought to separate us from the love and God and the source of life – *“sin, death, and the power of the devil”* (Small Catechism) – through his death and resurrection, we have confidence even in the most dire of circumstances that our God is able to defeat all that would fill our hearts with fear so that we might live the abundant life that our Lord desire for all of God’s children.

- “Let this affirmation be our ringing cry. It will give us courage to face the uncertainties of the future. It will give our tired feet new strength as we continue our forward stride toward the city of freedom. When our days become dreary with low-hovering clouds and our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, let us remember that there is a great benign Power in the universe whose name is God, and he is able to make a way out of no way, and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows. This is our hope for becoming better men. This is our mandate for seeking to make a better world.” – Martin Luther King, Jr., “Our God is Able.”

"I have my fears, but they don't have me." – Peter Gabriel.

Norman Rockwell's "Freedom from Fear" depicts a mother and father tucking their young child into bed, an image of comfort and reassurance made all the more poignant by the fact that this is occurring during the Battle of Britain as Nazi bombers were blitzing London on a nightly basis. Even as the bombs are exploding around them, the love that dwells in this home provides that reassurance comfort that overcomes the fear that those dark forces are seeking to inflict on such innocent families. As we live in the midst of forces that seek to instill fear into our homes and lives, may we always turn to that source of comfort and hope that overcomes and defeats the forces of fear, doubt and anxiety; for *"the answers to fear ... include clear-eyes recognition of the facades of human power, even those rooted in the threat of death, awareness of the conflict and division the gospel inevitably produces, and especially the deep awareness and conviction that God is present in the world, in mercy and in compassion."* (Saunders). The Lord is our light and our salvation; the steadfast love of the Lord that is ours in Jesus Christ is our freedom from fear!

Amen.