

DO NOT BE AFRAID

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JESUS SAID

“Do not be afraid.”

—Luke 12:32

It begins with Jesus. In His life, His death, His resurrection, His teachings, and promises, we find a guide to living well, meaningfully, with purpose and hope in an uncertain, unjust, and troubled world by Someone who did it, experienced it, felt it, but who also overcame it and transcended it. So when He commanded His disciples—as well as His followers almost 2,000 years later—to “not be afraid,” we ought to take notice. And when we find it echoed throughout the Gospels—in His story and His teaching and then throughout the Bible—it must grab our attention, challenge our assumptions, and shape our lives.

Too often, the power of Jesus’ teachings has been diminished by a superficial reading that tends to minimize or trivialize them as “nice” sayings, spiritual-sounding slogans, or perhaps even naïve idealism. While familiarity is good, the fact that many of us have heard these sayings numerous times can cause us to risk taking them for granted. There is a place for hearing Jesus’ teachings as words of comfort, but there must also be times when we hear them as words of challenge and command. Undoubtedly, there is comfort here, but we must also hear the command that transcends our circumstances and states of mind.

As such, Jesus’ “Do not be afraid” commands—and various similar teachings—are more about our focus than they are about our feelings. As human beings in a difficult and dangerous world, we will feel afraid at times, but fear is not to dominate or direct our lives. Instead, we repeatedly choose to live by different assumptions and values. This command is founded in this same Jesus and the larger realities of His kingdom. It is the present reality and future hope of this kingdom in which we are invited—but also commanded—to live courageously, humbly, generously, and without fear. That is what Jesus calls us to.

January 2

TO THE LITTLE FLOCK

*“Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father
has been pleased to give you the kingdom.”*

—Luke 12:32

As a recurring biblical theme, “Do not be afraid” has a ring of truth because the various commands recognize in themselves and in the circumstances in which they are given that fear is part of what it means to be human. Asking us to not be afraid or anxious includes an acknowledgment that there are many things in life that lead us to fear, aspects of life to which “anxiety is a natural response.”* We don’t usually say, “Don’t be afraid,” unless there is some apparent or threatened reality that might make us fearful.

Jesus takes this further in one of His most direct and explicit commands, calling His disciples a “little flock” after commanding them, “Do not be afraid” (Luke 12:32), thus implying and recognizing the apparent fragility of our human lives.† A “little flock” might remind us of a few sheep on the sparse hills of Judea, tended by a small boy on behalf of his family. The little flock might be threatened by a meager diet and the need to find water; it might be the target of thieves or predators. Its life and well-being seem tenuous—but for the care of a committed shepherd.

The Bible’s many “Do not be afraid’s” are not distanced from the reality of our experiences; they were given within and amid those realities and acknowledge the pervasiveness of our fears, large and small. “Do not be afraid” is not some nice saying, glib slogan, or marketing campaign. Many of our causes for fear are real, and God knows and has experienced these in Jesus. But this is why such statements are so significant for what it means to live with faith in an often fearful and fear-filled world.

* Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51—24:53*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 1165.

† Bock, 1165.

HOW THINGS OUGHT TO BE

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.

—Genesis 1:31

It can be hard to imagine a world without fear. Fear is such a part of our world and our human experience that it seeps into even our best imagination. But a world of goodness without fear is the reality of our world as God made it. As God paused at the end of each act of creation, He saw that it was “good” (Genesis 1:3, 9, 12, 18, 21, 25). And near the end of that work, He saw that His completed world was “very good” (Genesis 1:31).

It is worth pausing here with this God’s-eye view. God had made something very good. Nothing in the whole of creation would cause harm or fear. Instead, everything worked together for mutual flourishing and, it seems, particularly for human flourishing.

Within this new world, the first people were given the role of stewards. The first human responsibility was that of gardeners who were “to work” and “take care of” the garden (Genesis 2:15) and the good world God had made. They were to work in harmony with, and even to grow, God’s intention for goodness, mutuality, and peace in the world.

If we give this description enough of our imagination, it should prompt feelings of regret, perhaps a kind of homesickness for a world without pain, grief, and fear. But it should also alert us to the glimpses and echoes of this original design that we can still see in our world today. Acts of kindness and moments of peace, glimpses of beauty, and examples of creativity are all reminders of how God intended our world to be. As seemingly insubstantial as a flower or a tiny bird or as difficult an act of service or sacrifice as we can imagine, as ordinary as a simple meal or as grand as a mountain range or ocean sunset—they point us back to their Creator and insist that a world without fear is not only possible but is intended and not beyond the reach of our imagination.

January 4

THE CREATION OF REST

*God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it
he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.*

—Genesis 2:3

God's final act of the creation story was the creation of rest. And while all the work of the other days was "good," this seventh day was designated "holy." This unlikely conclusion to the creation story emphasized the nature of the world God had made, His intention for human life, and God's nature as Creator. God demonstrated the absence of fear and anxiety by this practice of rest, and He declared such an attitude and posture holy.

When we launch a new project or operation, our instinct is to check on its progress and ensure its continuity. Sometimes, this is necessary; often, it says more about our state of mind. In contrast, when the work of creation was done, God rested.

"God did not show up to do more. God absented God's self from the office. God did not come back to check on creation in anxiety to be sure it was all working. . . . The world is an anxiety-free one because the creator is anxiety-free and publicly exhibits that freedom from anxiety by not checking things out. . . . God rests, confident, serene, at peace. God's rest, moreover, bestows [restfulness] on creatureliness."*

If it was not already there in the essential goodness of creation itself, God instilled an anxiety-free, stress-reducing, fear-rejecting rhythm into the nature of our world. This would be the rationale for the Sabbath commandment given to humanity at Mt. Sinai (see Exodus 20:8–11). At that time, it offered the recently enslaved Hebrews a different rhythm to their lives than the perpetual work of survival that had been forced upon them in Egypt. And it still invites us to live in the harmonies and relationships that God intended for our lives and our world.

* Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 29, 30.

THE FIRST FEAR

*The LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?"
He answered, "I heard you in the garden,
and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."*

—Genesis 3:9, 10

The Bible story gives us limited insights into the initial relationship God had with Adam and Eve. The details of the processes by which they were each created portray God as intimately involved with them as creatures and then in conversation with them about their roles in this new world and the provisions He had made for their well-being. From the story in Genesis 3, it also seems that it was not unusual for God to come looking for them, to spend time walking and talking together with them "in the cool of the day" (Genesis 3:8).

But on that particular day, they hid from God. Something had changed. The story explains that they had listened to the God-questioning alternative offered by the serpent. It was not so much that they had questioned God but that they had questioned God apart from God. So, when they heard God looking for them, they felt afraid. God had not changed from the good creator they had previously known, but they had been changed by their distrust of God that the serpent's lies had prompted. As the story describes it, their shame and their fear in response to God's approach was "their first bitter taste of accepting the serpent's view of God."*

This is a wound that has been perpetuated and repeated in humanity ever since. "Biblically, anthropologically, and existentially *fear* is the most succinct description of the human condition."[†] Because of the broken relationship between us and our Creator, the God who is the source of all the goodness of our world and life itself is also an inevitable cause of fear in us. But the Bible insists that God is still good and has been working to overcome and undo our fear.

* Sigve K. Tonstad, *The Lost Meaning of the Seventh Day* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2009), 244, 245.

† Tonstad, 244.

January 6

BROKEN RELATIONSHIPS

*The man said, “The woman you put here with me—
she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.”*

—Genesis 3:12

When we understand God as our creator and the source of life, the world, and all its goodness, it is hardly a surprise that breaking that relationship will damage all other aspects of our lives and relationships. The story in Genesis 3 details each of these broken relationships in turn.

First, we suffer from a broken relationship with ourselves, reflected in the sense of shame described in Genesis 3:7 (compare to Genesis 2:25). Our relationships with other people are also broken and strained. Without much prompting, Adam and Eve were quick to blame someone else for what had gone wrong (see Genesis 3:12, 13). Their marred human relationship to the earth itself and to the rest of creation was, as described by God, the consequence of their broken relationship (see Genesis 3:16–24).

These broken relationships are the origin of our many experiences of fear, ultimately all pointing us back to this “abiding human plight.” “We fear that our lives have no story, because we have fled from the story God has given us. Our deep fears point us back to the deep story in which our flight from God leaves us fearful of a world that was meant to be received as a gift.”* Every aspect of human life and experience was distorted by sin, and fear was the most obvious, immediate, and enduring result.

But even in describing these broken relationships and their consequences, God offered a promise (see Genesis 3:15). Somehow, within this broken and fearful human story, there would be One who would defeat the source of lies and fear, even if at great cost to Himself. In restoring these broken relationships, God would bring an end to fear and ultimately re-create the world as it was intended to be. At this tragic moment of sudden fear and shame, God gave hope.

* Scott Bader-Saye, *Following Jesus In a Culture of Fear* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007), 159.