

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church**  
**Davidson, North Carolina**  
**Scott Kenefake, Interim Senior Pastor**  
**“Faith in an Age of Fear”**  
**Luke 24:36b-48**  
**3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Easter**  
**April 15, 2018**

*“Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.”<sup>37</sup> They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost.<sup>38</sup> He said to them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?<sup>39</sup> Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.”<sup>40</sup> And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet.<sup>41</sup> While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?”<sup>42</sup> They gave him a piece of broiled fish,<sup>43</sup> and he took it and ate in their presence.<sup>44</sup> Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.”<sup>45</sup> Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures,<sup>46</sup> and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day,<sup>47</sup> and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.<sup>48</sup> You are witnesses of these things” (NRSV).*

---

*“Jesus himself stood among (his scared, frightened, fearful disciples) and said to them, “Peace [shalom] be with you.”*

Last week, as our nation was commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., I was reminded (while watching an excellent program on his life and career) that Dr. King spoke often about fear, focusing on it directly in at least two published sermons; *Antidotes to Fear (1957)* and *The Mastery of Fear in 1962*.

The whole system of racial segregation, he points out, was buttressed by irrational fears: *“fear of losing a preferred economic position, fear of losing social status, fear of intermarriage, fear of adjusting to a new situation.”*

But King also insists that fear is characteristic of modern life as a whole, leaving a great many people *“psychologically wrecked and spiritually dejected.”*

He asked: *“How are we to address this widespread and deep-seated problem? King’s answer is suggested by his scriptural text for both sermons: “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18).*

*“Bigger armaments (he said) will not cast out fear; they increase it. The only antidote is the assurance that we are loved by a God who sends us to love even those sick with ‘the poisonous disease of fear.’”<sup>1</sup>*

I want you to think about this in terms of the fact that last Fall, the Harvard Psychologist, Steven Pinker, published a fascinating book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, a sweeping new review of the history of human violence. He argues that whatever we may think of the slaughter, torture and other horrors that have disfigured much of the past century, *the world is actually becoming a measurably gentler and much less dangerous place.*

---

<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *“Draft of Chapter XIV: The Mastery of Fear or Antidotes to Fear,”* in Clayborne Carson, ed., *The Papers of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*, vol. 6 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 540-541.

“Violence has declined over long stretches of time,” he asserts at the outset of his 800-page compendium of murder, mayhem and mass unpleasantness. “Today we may be living in the most peaceable era in our species’ existence.”<sup>2</sup>

And he’s not the only one making the case that this may be the best possible time to be alive—even though it may not feel that way. For example, more than a billion fewer people live in conditions of extreme poverty today than in 1990. During that same period, more than two billion gained access to improved drinking water, the percentage of undernourished people in developing countries was cut nearly in half, and there was a remarkable reduction in the proportion of the world’s population living in urban slums.

On the global health front, new infections of HIV fell by one-third between 2000 and 2012, mortality rates from malaria decreased by more than 25 percent during the past decade, and the mortality rate for children under five dropped by 41 percent between 1990 and 2011.

Educationally, the number of children out of school has declined by almost half since 2000, while the gender gap in primary education has closed in almost every country. *And*, despite the awful, headline grabbing violence in such places as Syria and Afghanistan and Myanmar and Yemen, levels of interstate and societal warfare are lower than at any point since the early 1960’s.

To put it succinctly, fewer children are starving and dying of disease, and more are in school, than at any time in recorded history.<sup>3</sup>

Yet a 2013 survey of Americans found that 66 percent think the share of the world’s population living in absolute poverty has doubled in the past two decades, and another 29 percent think it hasn’t changed—pessimistic perceptions *that are completely at odds with the facts*.<sup>4</sup>

The picture looks the same when we focus on the United States. For instance, in 1900, nearly 20 percent of all children born in this country died before they were five years old; by the beginning of this century, the percentage was 0.8. Over the past century the portion of the average family’s budget going toward food has fallen from 44 percent to around 15 percent.

Moreover, the mortality rate in the United States for the two leading causes of death—heart disease and cancer—has moved steadily downward over the past twenty-five years.

“We are (among) the healthiest, wealthiest, and longest-lived people in history, and (yet) we are increasingly afraid. This is one of the great paradoxes of our time ... It seems the less we have to fear, the more we fear.”<sup>5</sup>

Danny Westneat, a columnist for the Seattle Times, makes this argument even more immediate in a column marking the end of 2014. When compared to the previous year, he observes, unemployment was down, the budget deficit was down, oil imports and gas prices were down, the number of medically uninsured was down, teen pregnancies were down, the school dropout rate was down, the number of divorces and abortions were down—

But the number of people saying they were afraid for the future of the country was up 21 percent. It is a striking indication of how fear has shaped the national narrative, further abetted by the near-apocalyptic tone of recent political rhetoric<sup>6</sup>—which I’ll spare you!

Now don’t get me wrong—there are *real*, valid reasons why people might be anxious: about finding or keeping a job, about health care for ourselves or our loved ones, about safety for our children. There *are* threats to the United States and real reasons for World leaders to be concerned: a deteriorating environment, terrorism and civil conflict, far too many people still living in life-stunting poverty, racism, and other forms of violence against minorities. In short, there are understandable reasons why people might be afraid.

---

<sup>2</sup> Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*, (NY, NY: Viking, 2011), <https://stevenpinker.com/publications/better-angels-our-nature>

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, Ch. 3

<sup>4</sup> Barna Group, “*Global Poverty Is on the Decline, but Almost No one Believes It*, (www.barna.org)

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Gardner, *The Science of Fear*, (New York: Plume Book, 2009), 267, 10

<sup>6</sup> Danny Westneat, *2014 Is One Year in Need of an Image Makeover*, Seattle Times, December 27, 2014

What I am suggesting, however, is that fear has become the primary lens through which many Americans see contemporary events and that this narrative of fear can lead us as a nation to misperceive the world around us, to focus our anxiety on false targets, and to deny the interdependence so essential to human community.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps even worse for persons of faith, it can cause us to miss the astonishing, hopeful things God may be doing right now to promote fullness of life for all.

Remember: *“Jesus himself stood among (his scared, frightened, fearful disciples) and said to them, “Peace [shalom] be with you.”*

As Bishop Spong suggests: *“ ... Easter ... called the disciples beyond fear, as the heroic post-Easter behavior of the disciples reveals; it called them beyond tribal identity, as the story of the Holy Spirit giving them the ability to speak the language of their hearers makes clear (Acts 2); it called them beyond the limits of their religion, as the creation of a new holy day proclaims, and it called them beyond their sense of their own mortality, as their resurrection language illustrates; ... [and] they began to express their experience through liturgy.”*<sup>8</sup>

So, (with this in mind) ask yourself: what is blinding us to the positive things around us and why has this narrative of fear become so pervasive in our culture?

There are many theories that explain this, but I want to focus on just two: First, for the first time in two centuries, [some] people in Europe and North America feel that events are out of “our” control. Here’s a crude summary of the way many perceive the threat: *“Asia is about to overtake us economically. Fundamentalists in the Islamic world are intent on destroying us. Immigrants from the southern nations are about to overwhelm us.”* Dominique Moisi, a founder of the French Institute for International Affairs writes that fear has become *“the dominant emotion in the West.”*<sup>9</sup>

In a similar way, the late British-born historian, Tony Judt, argued that *“we have entered an age of fear”* marked by understandable insecurity in the face of terrorism or economic uncertainty and, *“perhaps above all, [by] fear that it is not just we who can no longer shape our lives but that those in authority have also lost control to forces beyond their reach.”*<sup>10</sup>

In short, we fear rapid, unmanageable change in a world that looks increasingly rudderless and unfamiliar—and it is often manifest in the language of fear.

The second theory or explanation is more insidious: Americans are excessively fearful because it is in the interests of various groups to make and keep us afraid.

Of course, fear is, to some extent, innate; our distant ancestors had an instinct to flee in the face of imminent danger. It seems clear, however, that our experience of fear *“is also shaped by a cultural script that instructs people on how to respond to threats to their security.”* In other words, what we fear and to what extent we fear it are largely learned. Various studies confirm that our emotional response is often *not proportional* to the actual threat, because we are strongly influenced by messages from our social context, which leaves people vulnerable to *“fear entrepreneurs.”*<sup>11</sup>

Barry Glassner put it this way: *“The short answer to why Americans have so many misbegotten fears is that immense power and money await those who tap into our moral insecurities and supply us with symbolic substitutes.”* In Glassner’s view, the primary offenders are the news media and social media—which bring an *immediacy* to distant and remote threats. Fear sells; fear increases ratings.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Michael Kinnamon, *“The Witness of Religion in an Age of Fear,”* (Louisville, KY, Westminster John Knox, 2017), 24,

<sup>8</sup> John Shelby Spong, *“The Easter Moment,”* (San Francisco, Harper One, 2010), Kindle Edition

<sup>9</sup> Moisi, *Geopolitics*, 91

<sup>10</sup> Tony Judt, *“Ill Fares the Land,”* (London: Penguin Books, 2010), 217

<sup>11</sup> Frank Furedi, *“The Only Thing We Have to Fear is the Culture of Fear,”* Spiked, April 4, 2007

<sup>12</sup> Barry Glassner, *“The Culture of Fear: Why Americans Are Afraid of the Wrong Things,”* Tenth Anniversary Edition (New York: Basic Books, 1999), xxxvi

Thus the public is fed a steady diet of sensationalized stories that play up the sense of threat. He notes, for example, that during the 1990's, when the murder rate in this country declined by 20 percent, the number of murder stories on network newscasts *increased* by 600 percent.<sup>13</sup>

This *misperceiving the times* is causing us to make some really bad public policy decisions—and these decisions have consequences for society as a whole in terms of our high incarceration rates (especially among black and brown males), the glut of firearms within our society—we have the highest rate of gun ownership in the world, our attitudes toward immigrants and immigration, and the massive amounts of money that we spend on defense and security—we spend exponentially more than any other country. And fear drives these responses and budgets and directs resources away from real human need.

But *“Jesus himself stood among (his scared, frightened, fearful disciples) and said to them, “Peace [shalom] be with you.”*

Friends, the Bible is not afraid of fear! Both the Hebrew Scriptures, authoritative for Judaism and Christianity, and the Christian New Testament speak often of fear, clearly acknowledging that it is a natural part of life. Yet the message ringing throughout both testaments is unmistakable: *“Be not afraid.”*<sup>14</sup>

This is a frequent refrain throughout Israel's early history, the Prophets, the Psalms, Proverbs, the Christian Gospels, and the Epistles.

Scripture teaches that anxiety, which is what humans feel when we are insecure, follows from trusting in the wrong things to protect us. If, for example, our sense of worth and personal security is tied to the size of our bank account, then we will likely never have *“enough.”*

This insight is succinctly illustrated in a parable found in the Gospel according to Luke: Jesus tells of a rich man who builds bigger barns to store his surfeit of stuff, so that he can *“eat, drink, and be merry”* without concern for others. But, of course, his abundance of earthly possessions cannot protect him from the fate of all humans—namely, death (Luke 12:16-21).

This is followed by a teaching on the futility of anxiety: *“Can any of you by worrying [by fearing for the future] add a single hour to your span of life?”*—or, as other translations have it, *“add a cubit to your stature?”* Rather, *“do not be afraid, little flock,”* but trust in God and seek God's kingdom.

Jesus concludes by suggesting that loving wrong things leads to needless fear—for *“where your treasure is, there will your heart be also”* (Luke 12:25, 32, 34).

In fact, following Jesus leads to radical *insecurity*. To quote social ethicist Theodore Weber: *“If the resurrection is truth, then whatever true security might mean, it is to be found on the other side of exposure to suffering and death.”*<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, it is found in the conviction *“that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”* (Romans 8:38-39).

So Christians should not expect total security in this world. In fact, the very desire for it points us in the wrong direction, since Christian faith both calls us to vulnerable service on behalf of others and assures us of God's abiding presence—even in the valley of the shadow of death.

As Marilynne Robinson put it: *“fear is not a Christian habit of mind.”*<sup>16</sup>

And that's the message we should be delivering loud and clear to our *“fear-soaked”* society. *Amen.*

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, see Chaps., 1 & 2

<sup>14</sup> Kinnamon, *The Witness of Religion in an Age of Fear*, 28

<sup>15</sup> *In Search of Security*, published by the United Methodist Council of Bishops Task Force on Safety and Security, 11, 15

<sup>16</sup> Marilynne Robinson, *“Fear,”* New York Review of Books, September 24, 2015, 28