

“Don’t Be Afraid”

A sermon delivered September 5th, 2010, at Foley UMC, by Dr. Lance Moore.

1st Kings 17:12-16:

Elijah asked a poor widow for water and a piece of bread:

“As surely as the LORD your God lives,” she replied, “I don’t have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it—and die.” Elijah said to her, “Don’t be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small cake of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son. For this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: ‘The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the LORD gives rain on the land.’” She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family. For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the LORD spoken by Elijah.”

Luke 12:25-32:

“Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest? Consider how the lilies grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith! And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.”

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When I was just beginning my adult life, in my twenties, I was afraid—plagued by fear and anxiety almost to the point of paralysis. I lived alone, I had dropped out of college and I was making \$4 an hour and had no prospect of a meaningful career. In my darkest hour, I remember getting my TIME magazine in the mail and on the cover, they had a picture of planet Earth, but shaped into the form of a hand grenade. The article inside reported that experts were predicting the end of the world was near, the “Doomsday Clock” had moved to within four minutes of midnight, the Soviet Union was massing troops and tanks and nuclear weapons, and the Middle East was a powder keg ready to explode. The year was 1979, and I was afraid for my very life and in deep, fearful depression, sure the world would end in flames the next day. That was over thirty years ago. Since then I’ve learned that most of the time, the very things we fear are the very things least likely to happen. Oh, bad things do happen to us from time to time... but they are usually the things we don’t expect or can’t predict. After 50 years of being a worry-wart, I finally gave it up and decided to trust God! My message today is simple, a classic three-point sermon:

1. Don’t fear for the future of the Church
2. Don’t fear for your economic future and well-being
3. And most of all, don’t fear death.

**Point One: Don’t be afraid for the church’s future:** this church has been here for 100 years, and it will most likely be here for another 100 years. Whenever a church has a change in leadership, there are two groups of people: some who say, “Thank goodness, I really didn’t like that preacher!” but another group who wonder if the church can survive the change. Foley United Methodist has had some serious challenges these past six to seven years. At least two people told me, six years ago, that

we would fail at building the Spirit Center and others, including myself, wondered how we'd pay the mortgage. We are still here. And even though I certainly have had moments of anxiety, deep down I never really worried because Jesus said in Matthew 16:18: "...I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." That's a pretty good insurance policy. Churches are amazingly resilient, more resilient than business institutions, even more resilient than governments. Kingdoms rise and fall, but the church shall not die. And I am quite confident the best days still are ahead of us here at Foley UMC: if for no other reason, we've had some of the WORST days in these six years plus that I've been your pastor:, we endured two contractor lawsuits, a three-million dollar price tag on our building, three hurricanes, an insurance crisis and accompanying real estate collapse in our area, the largest oil spill in American history, and the worst stock market crash since the Great Depression. Look up: do you see that? The lights are still on! And by the way, we've also had some of this church's greatest days together: we celebrated our 100-year church centennial, we completed the new building and renovated much of the old one, we've set 100-year records for worship attendance and membership, we continued our 60-year tradition of beach ministry, plus we started a new contemporary worship service here—and all of that with 98% volunteer labor! People who pronounce eulogies for churches are usually speaking too soon. I remember when I was appointed to Graceville, Florida, and before I got there, the church had burned to the ground. Some of the folks squabbled over the re-building efforts, some got discouraged and quit, the building process took longer than expected, the town itself was experiencing an economic downturn with many of the downtown stores boarded up, and people were leaving town. I

wondered myself if the church would survive. But despite my pessimism, today there still stands a beautiful new church building there and they have a thriving congregation. Today, the downtown of Graceville looks like a ghost town in spots. The church is one of the most beautiful buildings still standing there. So you see, churches are usually one of the strongest institutions in a community... the gates of hell will not prevail against us.

Now in most cases of survival and victory in God, God expects us to do our part. When Joshua felled the walls of Jericho, against insurmountable odds, he did it with God's power... but God still made Joshua and his men go through several motions, marching around the city in circles, blowing trumpets and all that. God expected obedience and Joshua's obedience led to victory. When the Israelites were defending themselves against the armies of Amalek, God intervened, but He required that victory would come only as long as Moses kept his arms raised. Over time, when Moses grew weary, Aaron and Hur reached over and held up Moses' arms. And they achieved victory... a victory that came from God but also required team effort. By the way, my arms have grown tired, so I expect some of you to step forward and help hold this church up!

King David understood the power of God to overcome mighty odds without fear. When David went to battle Goliath, he was not afraid. He said, "The LORD who delivered me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this [giant]." But God did not just strike Goliath down with a lightning bolt or give the giant a coronary: no, God made David walk out there and face him with his sling and stone.

The ONE victory in the Bible that did not require any action or courage on our part was Jesus upon the cross: that was all a complete gift from God. But other than that, every case of victory in the Bible comes when God's heroes stood up and faced the music, were brave in the face of fear, were obedient to God's instructions.

And so, victory for this church will require that you be obedient to God, and Jesus clearly commands us to do one thing: tithe. I don't know when or exactly where my next paycheck is coming from, but today I am placing in the offering a tithe of my final paycheck! If you will step out on faith and be obedient to God, the Church will be triumphant and will stand until Christ comes in final victory!

Now, bragging about my faith in the act of tithing is a boast you will have to forgive me for, but it makes a perfect transition to **Point number 2: do not fear for your economic security.** I don't. My dad faced the Great Depression as a small boy among eight other children on a dirt farm not far from here. They had no money. The only food they had was what they raised on the farm. They had no phone, no car, no electricity. *Gilligan's Island* had more luxuries than the Moore family in the Great Depression! But they survived! People who experienced the hardship of the Great Depression now even laugh about it or boast about it with pleasure and pride. Once when I was a child and my dad was regaling us with tales of what he and his brothers did in those days of stark poverty, the gleam in his eye and the laughter in his voice as he reminisced made me blurt out, "Gee, I wish *I* could have lived during the Great Depression!"

Now of course that is a stupid statement of a child who didn't know how bad the times were. And of course bad things do happen and of course you need to make plans for your future and you need to get yourself out of bed and go to work. God *does* take care of those who take care of themselves. That is NOT in the Bible word for word, but the principle is there. Paul said let those who refuse to work, not eat! So you gotta get out there and do your part. But Jesus said don't worry about it in the process. Relax. You will most likely not starve to death. In fact, more people in the United States die from having eaten too *much* than too little! And speaking of transitions...

**...don't be afraid to die!** That's our third point.

Don't live in fear of death. To quote from the heavy metal band, Blue Oyster Cult, "Don't Fear the Reaper!" Don't fear death.

Accept Jesus Christ as your Savior and believe in him and trust in him and then these promises will be yours:

In John 11:25-26: Jesus promised, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die."

In John 14:1-6, Jesus said: "Let not your heart be troubled: you believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions.... I go and prepare a place for you."

Jesus has been through dying and death and Hades and has come back, proclaiming, "I have the keys to death and Hades!" Why should we fear that which Jesus has already conquered?!

Yet one of the worst emotions that plague people is fear for their life, fear for their personal safety. How strange it is, then, that

people will pay money to go to horror movies for the express purpose of being, quote, “scared to death.” I suppose our subconscious mind knows all along that it is fake, even though our bodies reflexively jerk in panic when the monsters jump out from behind a door. And the pay-off is that when the patrons leave the theatre, their real life problems pale in comparison to the monsters of cinema.

There *are* monsters in this world, such things as terrorists trying to blow people up, wars, storms, disease and so on. There are some very frightening things alive in our world, and they are not vampires, they are real. They can attack you in broad daylight and they won't be scared off by garlic or a crucifix.

But first of all, those monsters are very, very rare. You are far more likely to die of natural causes than by vampire bite, terrorist attack, werewolf venom and zombies all put together. Second, and more importantly, we must learn that we waste our time and money if we get obsessed seeking absolute personal safety and security. It is an illusion. A misleading mirage.

There once was a loving couple who had the wife's elderly mother living with them. Their concern was for her security while both of them went away to work each day. So they devised a system of twelve different locks and bolts for the front and back doors of the house! The problem was, they overlooked the old woman's technical ability to operate all those devices. When a friend would want to call on her during the day, or when she would want to go out and enjoy the backyard, she had to turn down such opportunities because she didn't know how to get all the locks and bolts open! She ended up being a daytime prisoner, all in the name of feeling “secure.” One

doesn't even want to think of what might have happened if there had ever been a fire in the house. Many people end up being self-made prisoners of fear, trapped by their grasping for false security.

A friend told me of a man who feared a violent death and was obsessive about his self-defense. He had armed himself to the teeth. He drove a van that had blacked out windows and an alarm system and he stashed it full of guns: pistols in all the small compartments, rifles between the seats. But he died of a heart attack! His arsenal of weapons were an illusion of safety.

Instead, trust in Jesus, who said, “Do not be afraid, little flock for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” Jesus said that even knowing that his followers would face persecution, and he would soon face torture and death.

The reason I know these things is because the Bible tells me so. I also have complete confidence in the gift of eternal life, because I have *already* experienced the gift of eternal love.

Some of the most eloquent and truest words ever written are found in **1st Corinthians 13**: “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.”

**1st John 4** asserts that “love drives out fear.” Friends, love is the evidence that God’s promises can be trusted. Love is the proof of God. Because I know that love always perseveres, I

know that life will prevail. God's love never fails. Trust in  
that. Fear not, for He is with you always.  
And by the way, I will never stop loving you, either.

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