

‘Our Mighty Fortress’

Psalm 46; John 14:25-31

September 24, 2023

As I thought this week about this week’s sermon, my mind kept coming back to something that happened to me when I was just about Ben’s age. Then as it’s true now, I love music. Although my love has waned a bit as I’ve gotten older, I still enjoy whiling away the hours while listening to songs performed by my favorite bands. Just ask Natalie, many nights you’ll find me watching old concerts from the Grateful Dead or the Dave Matthews band on YouTube, just bopping along to the tunes. But that was the days before Spotify or Apple Music existed. A terrible time when, if you wanted to listen to a particular song or a particular musician or band, you had to go out and fork over hard-earned cash for one of their albums. Yeah, terrible time, right? But, yes, back when I was a kid, to listen to music, you generally had to purchase the entire record. And that was a problem, especially to a fourteen-year-old kid that was by age barred from getting a job. When I wanted an album, I’d have to work around the house, doing extra chores or hope that my birthday or a cash-giving holiday was on the horizon. But then, one day, leafing through an issue of Sports Illustrated, I came across a most curious advertisement. The Columbia House company had a splashy ad with lots of great albums pictured. The writing was even more enticing – Get 8 Whole Albums for just one penny? Eight albums for a penny, I thought? That’s a real steal. So, as quickly as I could, I filled out the paperwork, selecting my 8 albums for a penny. It was only when I went to my mom, asking for a stamp, that my hopes cooled, but only for a moment. My mom, giving me the stamp, warned me that it would cost more than a penny, that I should be prepared. I laughed at her. See the ad? It says 8 albums for a penny. And, I knew with all the certainty of a budding 12-year-old legal mind, that to charge me more than a penny would be false advertising and that would clearly be against the law. So, grudgingly, my mom let me mail off the card and I began my anxious wait. For the next several weeks, my first question upon arriving home from school would be, “did it arrive?” Finally, one day about 8 weeks later, my mom informed me that a package had arrived in the mail. And there it was, 8 perfectly shrink-wrapped albums of my choosing. There was Dark Side of the Moon, Hotel California, Sgt. Peppers and a host of other classic rock albums. I so vividly remember my joy at taking those albums out of the shrink-wrapping and seeing the cover art. But, there, nestled among the albums was a relatively innocuous white sheet. It turns out it was an invoice telling me that I owed the Columbia House Record Club about \$23 for what was called “Shipping and Handling.” Well, I was a little disappointed but 8 albums for 23 bucks was still a huge steal because at the time, albums were about 8-9 dollars at the time.

But that wasn’t the only string attached. Imagine my surprise when, several weeks later, a Go-Go’s album that I definitely did not want showed up at my door. Making matters worse, this time the invoice was for nearly \$18 dollars, which covered the cost of the album plus the dreaded shipping and handling. Turns out, each month, you had to reply in the negative with a little card that they sent you in the mail. If you didn’t return it, it was assumed you wanted the highlighted album and boom, they sent it to you. And, guess what? Each one cost about two and a half times what an actual album cost from a local record store. I lived up to the terms of that Columbia House deal but only after I must’ve bought at least like six albums I didn’t want because of my lax oversight of those little cards.

I remember that history because I think it perfectly illustrates the ways of this world. As we all know from the accumulation of words of wisdom and lessons learned, there is no such thing as a free lunch. Or, put another way, there are always strings attached to any good thing.

Which is why we get such good and life affirming news when Jesus Christ speaks to us in the 14th chapter of the Gospel of John saying, “*Not as the world gives do I give to you.*” That’s good news, folks. For we know, all too well, the ways of this broken world. But it gets even better. Jesus Christ continues, saying, “*Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.*”

Now, there is surely as discordant words as you’ll find compared to today’s world. For if anything, we are the United States of Anxiety. Believe it or not, this undercurrent was actually picked up by Charles Schultz all the way back in the late fifties. In a Peanuts comic strip, Lucy talks with Charlie Brown and her brother, Linus. Lucy inquires, “What are you two looking so worried about?” to which the two reply, “The future.’ Lucy then goes on to ask if there is anything in particular that they fear.

Their response is amusing. They declare that they're worried about everything, that their fear is, according to the comic strip, very broadminded.

How true is that today? Especially after the pandemic, right? Do you remember? I'm sure you do. There, on our television and phone screens, were these horrific numbers, estimating the number of deaths we were likely to experience from COVID. To make matters worse, we were quarantined in our homes with little to do with our fears but dwell upon them constantly, night and day. I remember one time, right during the darkest days of the fear and the panic, that I needed to go to the CVS. Well, I didn't really want to be anywhere, much less a place where sick people necessarily congregate to get medicines for whatever ails them. I deliberately waited until like 2am in the morning to go in order to minimize my exposure. Even so, being in the store felt transgressive and frightening at the same time. Like I was doing something I shouldn't at the consequences would be severe.

Yes, fear and anxiety are drowning us alive in these early decades of the 2000s. Here's something I ran across in an online devotion from Ligonier – "Sally worries about the kids all day long as they are at school. Jed never seems to put the burden of his finances down. Linda fears that she will never get married. Sarah dreads the pains of getting old. Fred constantly worries about the people around him and what they are thinking. Mary is never free from worry about her weight. As a senior, Jared is in a bit of a panic about what will happen after college. Jaqueline admits that she is a bit of a germophobe. Ben avoids big crowds, but he doesn't want anyone to know. Sharon is afraid that God doesn't love her, but she doesn't talk about it much. Ron knows he spends too much time worrying about losing his job, but he can't seem to keep his mind from going there. Dina worries so much about her adult children that she is afraid her frequent calls will drive them away." Sound about right?

Yes, we are positively eaten up with the excessive baggage of fear and worry. And in that anxious space, we are less capable, less imaginative than ever before. Ever wondered why so many of the big problems facing our society aren't being solved? I think this obsession with fear and worrying is as good a place to start investigating as any. But when we hear of a way out, a way to be freed of the terrible baggage of fear and worry, our thoughts immediately assume that there isn't a solution or that any one that offered relief would come with too many strings attached for our liking.

But the answer is here, located right in Jesus' words to us. But, beyond that, the pages of Scripture are replete with God's ongoing command for us NOT to worry. Our Old Testament reading this morning, from Psalm 46, is another great piece upon which we can release the burden of our fears to an almighty God that has done everything for us and for our salvation in and through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. In the second and third verse of the Psalm we hear "*Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling.*" As a matter of fact, I once heard a preacher indicate that the Bible contained enough charges from God not to fear that the Bible held one for every day in a calendar year. And while in order to get there you have to be really liberal with matters. Regardless, there are still ample instructions that we should not miss the drift. That this direction to be freed from our fears is enumerated so many times in the pages of Scripture, we simply must hear its truth.

And we should also, take a moment to realize that it is in the hours just prior to His death that Jesus says the comforting words to us. The Gospel of John contains a final discourse and prayer with the disciples that makes up the majority of several chapters of John's Gospel. There, Jesus gives instructions and offers comfort to the disciples even as the hours grow short for Him. There, at the point of His most intense peril, Jesus is most fixated on assisting others. That is His words come at a time when fear itself could've swallowed Him whole. We know Jesus knows what's coming from His prayer to His Father in the Garden of Gethsemane. But, even with His encroaching crucifixion, Jesus is intent on helping others. And throughout the 14th chapter, we get the introduction of the Holy Spirit into the text. It's here, knowing that He'll soon be removed from His followers through death, that Jesus announces the impending coming of His Holy Spirit. And we shouldn't overlook that it is the Spirit's presence that makes the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ possible, even under the worst times of stress and fear and worry.

Perhaps the most succinct scripture on this comes to us from 2 Timothy 1:7. There we read, "For

God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control." 2 Timothy is a letter written by the Apostle Paul to his protégé Timothy, who was a young pastor in the city of Ephesus. It is believed to be one of Paul's last letters, written while he was in prison and facing martyrdom. In the letter, Paul encourages Timothy to be strong in his faith and to continue in the work of the gospel, despite the difficulties he is facing. 2 Timothy 1:7 highlights the foundation of Timothy's faith and ministry. The verse states, *"For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control."* Timothy's authority and power as a minister of the gospel comes from God and not from human strength. The fear that Timothy is experiencing is not from God. Timothy may be experiencing fear of retaliation for preaching the gospel, much like his mentor Paul is experiencing.

Paul encourages Timothy not to be ashamed of the gospel or of Paul himself, who is suffering in prison. He reminds Timothy that he has been given the Holy Spirit, which comes with power, enabling us to accomplish God's purposes. The Greek word used in 2 Timothy 1:7 for "power" is "dunamis," which refers to the ability to accomplish something or the capacity for action. As Timothy submits to the leading of the Holy Spirit, he will experience the fruit of the Spirit promised in Galatians 5:22-23 - namely love and self-control; helping him to overcome his fears. As Timothy submits to the power of the Holy Spirit within him, the fear of man will be replaced by a love for those who are persecuting the church and a desire that they might be set free from their own bondage to sin through the proclamation of the gospel. His fears will no longer rule him, keeping him in bondage. He will have self-control enabling him to overcome his fears.

So how do we manage our fears with our faith? What are some concrete actions we can take today to make sure that our obsession with fear begins to abate? The first step I suggest is to write out a list of your fears. "There are times when I've felt afraid, but I didn't even know why." If you keep your fears inside, you allow your mind to control how you feel. We all know how that turns out!

In order to prevent this from happening, the first step is to identify what your fears are. Ask yourself, what makes me feel afraid? Then, instead of just thinking about these things, write them down. When you write down your fears on paper and actually question them, it forces you to analyze why you are afraid. Questions are designed to trigger your fears and bring them to the surface. Is this going to be a comfortable process? Absolutely not. Deep inner work never is! However, if you continue to keep your feelings in the dark, the scarier they will be, and the more disempowered you will become.

Once you identify your fears, you're ready for the next step which is to Choose to Trust God with Your Fears. Now, if you are a control freak, this is going to be difficult for you. But if you are trying to manage your fears by trying to control all the possibilities/outcomes, you are only making the problem worse. Trust me when I say that this is a losing battle. I've heard people use what's called a God Box to help them do this. A God-box is simply that a box. Like a suggestion box, it's a place where you put little slips of paper. When you become aware of a fear dominating your life, new or old, just write it down on a piece of paper. Then, give it to the God box and, through prayer and meditation on God's goodness, try to leave the fear there...in the box. One friend I know does this. She gets a kick every six months or so by opening the God box and seeing all the little slips of paper with her fears. Most, if not all of them, were NOTHING TO FEAR AT ALL!

Fear results in controlling behavior, and when this behavior doesn't give us the results we're seeking (which is usually the case), it further intensifies our fears. Control has no place on the path to learning how to overcome fear. So, instead of controlling everything, choose to trust God with your fears. Say, "God, You know I struggle with this fear, but I choose to trust You anyway. I am going to invite You into my inner world and ask that You help me to feel peace." *True freedom comes from fully releasing control and trusting God. When you are able to do this, fear will begin to lose its grip on you.*

Finally, seek God until He takes your fears away. Seek Him by reading what He has to say through the Bible. Seek Him through prayer; seek Him through your circle of Christian friends by having people pray for you. Seek Him in other books written by Christians, seek after God day and night until He takes away your fears. King David said it this way in Psalm 34:4, *"I sought the Lord, and He answered me; He delivered me from all my fears."* Just think about that with your fear. One day you

can wake up and say, "I am not afraid. I sought the Lord, and He answered me. He delivered me from all of my fears."

I love this quote from the devotional Jesus Calling: "We often glance at God but gaze at our circumstances. We have it backward. When we learn to constantly gaze at Jesus and only occasionally look at our problems, our fears will fade away."

Now, I may not know you, but I do know this about you. You will certainly go through some difficult times. But you do not have to be afraid of them. Because God has not given you a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind. We can literally drive ourselves crazy with fear. Or we can break up with fear by identifying what it is that we are afraid of, choose to trust God with that fear, then seek Him until our fear subsides. And I think here, we necessarily look at Jesus as a cue to us for what to do when we're frightened or when things are looking negatively. And, wouldn't you know it? It's a simple solution. Seek out people to help. That's right. As counterintuitive as it may sound, when fears and worries have you by the neck, don't submit to them. You were not, after all, given a spirit of fear. No, challenge your worries by locating someone to assist. You'd be amazed by how much that helps us.

Sophie had always been a reserved and introverted person, preferring the quiet comfort of her own company to social gatherings. However, life had a way of challenging even the most introverted souls. When a powerful hurricane was forecasted to strike her coastal town, Sophie couldn't help but feel immense fear and anxiety. As the storm approached, Sophie decided to seek refuge in a local hurricane shelter. The shelter was filled with people from all walks of life, each facing their own fears and uncertainties. Sophie found herself in a sea of strangers, and the noise and commotion only intensified her anxiety. But something remarkable happened over the next few days. Sophie, despite her initial fright, found herself reaching out to others in the shelter. She noticed an elderly couple who seemed overwhelmed and offered to help them set up their cots. She struck up a conversation with a single mother who was struggling to keep her children calm and shared her own coping strategies. Sophie even organized a makeshift game night for the children to distract them from the storm's fury. In helping others, Sophie's fear began to dissipate. She realized that she wasn't alone in her anxiety and that by extending a helping hand and a listening ear, she could make a positive difference in the lives of those around her. As the hurricane raged outside, a sense of unity and support emerged within the shelter. When the storm finally passed, and the residents returned to their homes, Sophie carried with her a newfound sense of purpose and courage. She had faced her own fears head-on by focusing on helping others through their own anxieties. In doing so, she discovered that the relief and comfort she provided to those around her had become her own source of strength.

Sophie's story reminds us that in times of fear and uncertainty, reaching out to help others can transform our own outlook and alleviate our worries. Acts of kindness and compassion not only benefit those in need but also have the power to ease our anxieties and bring relief to our hearts.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Scripture and Quotes for Preaching

Introduction:

- Personal anecdote about music and childhood experiences.
 - Reflect on the love for music, especially bands like the Grateful Dead and Dave Matthews.
 - Mention the evolution of music access from vinyl records to streaming services.

I. The Columbia House Record Club Story

- A childhood experience illustrating the concept of "strings attached."
 - Describe the allure of the Columbia House Record Club advertisement.
 - Highlight the excitement of selecting 8 albums for a penny.
- The unexpected costs and strings attached.
 - Explain how the initial joy turned into disappointment with hidden charges.
 - Mention the gradual realization of additional costs through unordered albums.
- Drawing parallels between worldly promises and life's disappointments.
 - Connect the story to broader life experiences where promises often come with hidden conditions.
 - Emphasize the disillusionment that can result from trusting worldly assurances.

II. Jesus' Promise: "Not as the world gives do I give to you." (John 14)

- Exploring Jesus' words in John 14 as a source of comfort.
 - Analyze Jesus' message of a different kind of giving compared to the world.
 - Emphasize the timeless relevance of Jesus' teachings.
- Contrasting the broken world with Jesus' promise.
 - Discuss the prevalent fear and anxiety in today's society.
 - Explain how Jesus' promise offers an alternative to worldly fears.
- Emphasizing the discord between Jesus' message and the world's anxieties.
 - Reference Charles Schultz's Peanuts comic strip highlighting broad-based fears.
 - Show how Jesus' message stands in contrast to the world's anxieties.

III. Overcoming Fear Through Trust in God

- The impact of the pandemic on fear and anxiety.
 - Highlight the collective fear and anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic.
 - Acknowledge the universal experience of heightened anxiety.
- Personal experience of fear when going to CVS.
 - Describe the fear associated with everyday activities during the pandemic.
 - Share a personal anecdote about going to CVS late at night.
- The need to release control and trust God.
 - Explain the futility of trying to control all possible outcomes.
 - Emphasize the importance of trusting God with fears.
- 2 Timothy 1:7 as a reminder of God's gift of power, love, and self-control.
 - Quote 2 Timothy 1:7 and provide context.
 - Discuss the significance of God's gift in overcoming fear.

IV. Practical Steps to Manage Fear

- Identifying and listing one's fears.
 - Encourage self-reflection and the process of acknowledging fears.
 - Explain how confronting fears can lead to understanding and healing.
- Choosing to trust God with fears instead of seeking control.
 - Stress the idea that control exacerbates fear.
 - Highlight the importance of relinquishing control to God.
- Seeking God through prayer, reading the Bible, and seeking support.
 - Recommend seeking solace and strength in faith-based practices.
 - Encourage prayer, Bible study, and seeking guidance from fellow believers.
- Emphasizing the importance of constant focus on Jesus instead of circumstances.

- Discuss the benefits of maintaining a Christ-centered perspective.
- Offer practical advice for redirecting focus towards Jesus in times of fear.

V. Seeking Out Others for Help

- Encouragement to seek help from others when dealing with fear.
 - Explain the power of community and support systems.
 - Highlight the value of sharing fears and anxieties with trusted individuals.
- Illustration of Sophie's story during a hurricane.
 - Describe Sophie's character and introverted nature.
 - Narrate her transformation through helping others during a crisis.
- The transformation of fear into courage through helping others.
 - Discuss how acts of service can diminish one's own fears.
 - Emphasize the sense of unity and purpose that emerges in challenging times.

Conclusion:

- Reiteration of the sermon's main message: Trusting God, helping others, and breaking up with fear.
 - Summarize the key takeaways from the sermon.
- Call to action: Facing fears with faith and serving others.
 - Encourage the congregation to apply the sermon's principles to their lives.
- Closing prayer invoking the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
 - Offer a prayer for strength, courage, and the ability to overcome fear through trust and service.

Scripture and Quotes

John 14:25-31 – “These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. ²⁶ But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. ²⁷ Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. ²⁸ You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away, and I will come to you.’ If you loved me, you would have rejoiced, because I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I. ²⁹ And now I have told you before it takes place, so that when it does take place you may believe. ³⁰ I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no claim on me, ³¹ but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father. Rise, let us go from here.

“Sally worries about the kids all day long as they are at school. Jed never seems to put the burden of his finances down. Linda fears that she will never get married. Sarah dreads the pains of getting old. Fred constantly worries about the people around him and what they are thinking. Mary is never free from worry about her weight. As a senior, Jared is in a bit of a panic about what will happen after college. Jaqueline admits that she is a bit of a germophobe. Ben avoids big crowds, but he doesn’t want anyone to know. Sharon is afraid that God doesn’t love her, but she doesn’t talk about it much. Ron knows he spends too much time worrying about losing his job, but he can’t seem to keep his mind from going there. Dina worries so much about her adult children that she is afraid her frequent calls will drive them away.”

Psalm 46:2-3 – “Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling”

2 Timothy 1:7 – “For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.”

Psalm 34:4 – “I sought the LORD, and He answered me; He delivered me from all my fears.”

Jesus Calling – “We often glance at God but gaze at our circumstances.” We have it backward. When we learn to constantly gaze at Jesus and only occasionally look at our problems, our fears will fade away.”