



BE NOT AFRAID

DAILY
DEVOTIONAL

December 1 - 7

Introduction

*Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen.
Don't be afraid.*

FREDERICK BUECHNER

There is so much in this world to make us afraid. Wars and rumors of wars. Natural disasters and changing climate patterns. Political polarization and social unrest. Sickness and disease. Financial struggles and uncertainty about the future.

Fear is a powerful force, and it's hard to not let it paralyze us and completely overwhelm us. But God doesn't want our lives to be crippled by fear. As the apostle Paul reminds us in 2 Timothy 1:7, "For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline."

This doesn't mean terrifying things won't happen. But it does mean that, even in the midst of such fearful moments, we can find a peace and a joy that transcends all understanding. "The light shines in the darkness," John's gospel tells us, "and the darkness cannot overcome it," (John 1:5).

Advent is the liturgical name given to the four weeks leading up to Christmas. It comes from the Latin word *advantus*, which means "coming." The season of Advent is the time in which we wait for and look forward to the coming of Christ, the true light of the world.

Now of course Christ has already come. The kingdom of God has already been brought near in Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension. But we are still waiting for our Savior and Lord to return, to bring God's kingdom in its completion on that great Day when, at last, the darkness will be no more. As Christians, we live "between the times," between Christ's first coming and his glorious return.

On Sunday mornings in gathered worship, we will be engaging the first two chapters of Matthew's gospel. Our Advent theme is based on the words spoken by the angel to Joseph: "Be not afraid!" (Matt. 1:20). No matter what happens in this world or in our personal lives, we can find courage and hope because God is with us.

Christ has come.

Christ will come again.

And Christ comes to us even now.

This devotional is comprised of daily Scripture meditations and stories of hope written by members of Trinity Church. There is one for each day, leading up to Christmas, to encourage your heart and to help you enter more deeply into the waiting and yearning for our Savior to come. May these daily devotions, in the words of J.R.R. Tolkien, be to you "a light when all other lights go out."

Pastor Brian Keepers

The First Interview

Sunday December 1 | Jeff Barker

Read Matthew 1:18-25

“But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home . . .” (Matthew 1:20)

When our first child was born, we felt called to move back to northern Illinois. We wanted our son to know his extended family who lived there, and it was also time for Karen to get her graduate degree.

One morning, I was sitting on the edge of the bed lost in thought. Karen asked me what was wrong. I said, “I don’t know how I’m going to take care of our baby while you’re in school and also put food on the table. I’m obviously going to have to get a job working nights, but I’m going to have to be awake during the day to take care of Joseph. I don’t understand how this can happen.”

Karen said, “You don’t have to know everything. Your job is to pray. And believe. And wait.”

Her words calmed me a bit. They seemed obvious and easy and therefore a bit simplistic. But I agreed with all those steps: pray, believe, wait.

We moved to DeKalb, and I began to look for a job. The very first job interview was at a ServiceMaster cleaning company. I explained to my potential employer that my wife was starting graduate school. I was looking for a job that would let me care for my infant son during the day and work at night to support my family. My potential employer said, “We’re looking for an office manager in our home-operated business. We can set up a playpen in the office, and you can bring your son to work.” Pray. Believe. Wait. Boom. The very first interview. I took the job, and it lasted a year. More answers to prayer followed, but that’s another story.

Question: As we begin this Advent season, what are you waiting for? How might God want to shape you in this experience of waiting, as you pray and trust in Him?

Prayer song:

Wait, wait, wait, just wait upon the Lord.

Wait, wait, wait, the Lord says, "Wait and wait."

He'll renew your strength, so you will not faint.

Just wait, wait, wait.

Amen.

Turning to God

Monday December 2 | Michael Fahrenbruch

Read Matthew 6:25-35

*“And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?”
(Matthew 6:27)*

My wife and I faced a strange bout of fear. It should have been a night of overwhelming joy. In our tenth year of marriage she returned a positive pregnancy test. We were surprised, and happy, and even a little joyful. But we were also fearful.

Ten years of relative infertility along with two miscarriages along the way will do strange things to a couple. We wanted to be overjoyed. But both of us remembered the past suffering through the unborn children we'd lost along the way, and both of us were afraid of facing that pain again. We called parents who were thrilled for us, and helped remind us that worrying would not add an hour to our life, nor would it help this child come to full term.

After that we prayed fearfully, tearfully, and expectantly. Later in that fall, our son was born. Regardless, though, of how that turned out, the truth would have stayed the same: Worrying in the face of that fear was not the solution; Instead, it was turning to God.

Question: What are you worried about today? Rather than feeling shame about your worry, how can you allow it to direct you to God?

Prayer: *Jesus, you tell me not to worry about tomorrow, and that worrying cannot add a single hour to my span of life. And yet I do worry. And my worry right now can feel so heavy. Thank you that you don't shame me in my place of worry, but you invite me to turn to you with this anxiety and fear. As we enter into this season of Advent, give me courage to seek first your kingdom and righteousness, and to relinquish my need for control. And give me just enough faith to trust you today. Amen.*

Fear Cannot Survive When We Praise You

Tuesday December 3 | Jamie Prescott

Read Psalm 150

*“Let everything that breathes praise the LORD! Praise the LORD!”
(Psalm 150:6)*

I was pregnant with my first child, and labor was just weeks away. I was excited to meet my son, but also nervous about delivery. My doctor had been closely monitoring baby’s size, as there was concern of shoulder dystocia. My mind went to what-ifs and worst case scenarios. And yet, as anxiety crept in, God graced me with numerous nudges that he was in control.

A week before my son’s birth, as I lay awake at 3am, the Lord brought to mind lyrics from a song: “Fear cannot survive when we praise you”.

The day of induction came and after a miraculously short labor, my beautiful baby boy was born a healthy 8 lbs 1 oz. Not too big, not too little. The scans didn’t show what God knew: my boy was just the right size.

Judah is three years old now and one of his favorite songs is “We Praise You.” It’s a full circle moment to hear him sing this song aloud. Judah’s name means “praise” and it’s my prayer that as he grows he too will experience praise as a weapon that conquers all anxiety.

Question: When you are anxious, what unhealthy patterns of reactivity do you experience (scrolling social media, watching Netflix, emotional outbursts, overreactions, criticism, etc.)? Instead, what might it look like for you to respond in praise?

Prayer: *God, sometimes the darkness feels really overwhelming. There are times when it feels all too much and anxiety can be crippling. I doubt and I question. Remind me, God, that you are the one who holds all things together. May praise be for me a weapon that conquers all anxiety. When I am overcome with anxious thoughts, may my heart turn to praise. Fear cannot survive when we praise you. Amen.*

Toward Faithfulness

Wednesday December 4 | Barb Dewald

Read Revelation 2:8-11

“Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.” (Revelation 2:10)

I was 14 years old, standing in front of the congregation of Frieden’s Reformed Church in rural South Dakota on Confirmation Sunday. The previous Wednesday night had been our “Examination” where the class of 8th graders memorized and publicly recited verses from the Heidelberg Catechism. Today was the easy part! Each of us waited for our turn to stand in front of the pastor as he pronounced a scripture verse blessing that he had chosen for us. I was eager for this to be a meaningful verse, one that I would claim and carry with me to guide my life. The moment came and Rev. Roemer spoke the words of Revelation 2:10: “Barbara: Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life.” What?!? What’s with the death and persecution verse? My friends got the “love one another,” “Lord is my shepherd,” “peace I leave with you,” verses. My 14 year old self with little spiritual or scriptural understanding or depth was disappointed.

I did memorize the verse (it was short) though I never claimed it as a favorite or life verse. However, I recognize now that almost without my knowing it, this scripture would continue to pop into my head and heart. During times of fear and anxiety in life decisions and experiences of growing up, moving, job responsibilities and performance, finances, family illnesses, difficult relationships, aging parents, etc. Revelation 2:10 reminded me that my job is to be faithful even when I can’t see or predict the outcome. Faithful to take the next step of listening to God’s voice and then to be obedient to what I hear. Faithful to trust that God sees me and that God knows the end of the story.

My quick initial judgment was wrong. Rev. 2:10 was indeed a great scripture that I believe God chose for me. One that continues to encourage me toward faithfulness, moves me forward even when I fear what might be ahead, and reminds me of God's eternal perspective.

Question: What does it look like for you to be faithful? What is one faithful step that God is prompting you to take?

Prayer: *Thank you, faithful God, for your presence that conquers fear. Open our eyes, ears, and hearts to be attentive to your prompting and give us courage to be obedient to take one faithful step. Thank you for the promise of eternal life that helps us to persevere. Amen.*

Wherever You Go

Thursday December 5 | Jim Mead

Read Joshua 1:1-9

"I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go." (Joshua 1:9)

Everyone's journey is unique, as personal as one's DNA. So it would be presumptuous and unreasonable to apply my "wherever you go" chronicle to anyone else's life. Indeed, Joshua 1:1-9 was originally the (military) itinerary of a people group and its divinely appointed leader over 3000 years ago in a land far away. There is no simple correspondence between ancient Israel and our community, but that does not mean the principle of verse 9 remains beyond our grasp. Other biblical authors cited this verse for their readers centuries later, and thus God's word nourishes us with its theological wisdom.

That said, Anne and I can only testify how we understand God's providence and guidance in our lives. For us, "wherever you go" means a combined twelve different mailing addresses spread across seven decades. One might expect that with all of those moves and residences we would be masters at navigating the challenges and uncertainties that come with change. If only that were true . . .

We can testify, however, that Christ has been with us wherever we have lived and through all of the unpredictable joys and sorrows. Yes, many times we have been afraid in spite of the biblical admonition not to be. Nevertheless, over time, within communities like Trinity Church, we have learned more faith, more confidence, more hope. For 25 years, you have been God's people to us, the body of Christ in this place to which we have come. And with you, through work and worship, we have welcomed many blessings and faced even the things that tried to frighten and dismay us.

Question: What transitions or uncertainties are you facing in your life right now? How might Jesus want to remind you that he is with you, “wherever you go?”

Prayer: *God of Providence, you are faithful to hold and guide me through all of life’s transitions and uncertainties. Thank you for your constant presence, especially when I face circumstances that try to frighten and unsettle me. And thank you for the body of Christ and all the ways you are cultivating the fruit of the Spirit in my life through your people. Grant me courage today to step out in faith, resting my heart in the confidence that wherever I go and whatever I face, you will always be with me. Amen.*

Letting Go of Fear

Friday December 6 | Tana Van Gorp

Read Proverbs 3:5-6

“Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own understanding....” (Proverbs 3:5)

Today marks 3 years since my mom’s very sudden and unexpected passing. She was my best friend and my rock. I remember a few weeks before she died thinking that if anything really hard happened in my life that I would be ok because I would have my mom there to help me through it. Then she was gone.

I remember feeling so much fear wondering how I would get through life without my person I turned to for everything. I clung to my Bible, not even having it open sometimes, but knowing that I could make it through the fear of a world without my mom because I had God and all the promises He was showing me in the scriptures I was reading.

I have a petal from one of the flowers off my mom’s casket pressed next to Proverbs 3:5-6. I definitely didn’t understand why my mom was called home that day and I still wonder that often, but reading those verses and trusting that God had a plan for this and would use her death helped me keep going.

Fast forward to today; my current season of life looks nothing like I had planned and there have been and will continue to be things that spark fear and worry. I can look back and see how God used my mom’s death to push me, or more like shove me, closer to Him in order to prepare me for my journey with divorce and becoming a single mom.

In the past, I would have gone to my mom first and relied on her to help me through the hard times instead of turning to God. Now I turn to Him with my fears and worries first and have felt a peace that only He can provide. It is almost impossible to stay living in fear when I trust God with that fear and give it to Him in prayer.

Question: What fears or worries are you carrying or holding onto today that you are willing to let go and give back to God?

Prayer: *Father God, thank you for the gift of being able to come before you with our fears and our worries. Help us to lay them before you and remember that you can carry the weight of them. Amen*

My Peace I Give to You

Saturday December 7 | Karen Barker

Read Psalm 34:3-6 and John 14:27

"I sought the Lord, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears. . . . This poor soul cried and was heard by the Lord and was saved from every trouble." (Psalm 34:4,6)

Do passages like this bother you? I mean, what is it saying?! All of my fears? Every trouble? I have a lot of fears when it comes right down to it. And have had troubles. You have too, haven't you? My father died of cancer when he was 63. It was awful. Did I not cry loudly enough? My son is an alcoholic, a recovering one, thank God, but I think that would be called a "trouble." Did the Lord not hear me? These might be extreme examples, but still. . .

I have other fears and troubles. I am fearful about our country, fearful for the people of Ukraine and that we won't do the right thing by them, fearful of the irrelevance of retirement, fearful of what will become of the tiny dying church I am attending, fearful of any number of things on behalf of my children. I don't know anyone who has a life without any fear or troubles. Do you?

Is it because no one I know is "seeking" hard enough or crying out loudly enough? That can't be it. Your Bible may tell you that this particular psalm is praise for David's deliverance from Abimelech; it's a specific poem for a specific event. Not unlike the praise I bring to God for a specific answer to prayer in my life. You too? So maybe this passage doesn't mean my life will be trouble free and absent all fear. Maybe I need to look deeper.

So, I turn to the John passage and this is the phrase that stands out to me: "[M]y peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives." Not as the world gives. What peace is Jesus giving me here? In chapters 13 – 17 Jesus is spending his words and his energy reminding his disciples who they are. They are children of God. Each one a child of God. A child of the living God. What could be better and more comforting than that? The world doesn't give peace. I have peace amidst the fears and the troubles because I am a child of the living God.

Question: What trouble or fear is on your heart today? How does receiving Jesus' peace, remembering that you are a child of the living God, help you deal with this trouble or fear?

Prayer: *"I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart. . . and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness." Psalm 138.*

