

Our scripture this morning comes at the point of the most heightened anxiety and anticipation. Years of slavery have been capped off with ten devastating plagues on the Egyptians that oppressed them. Pharaoh's noose has tightened, but God has tightened his even more. The Israelites have seen God's power and deliverance displayed on a national scale, and finally, after the death of every firstborn Egyptian male in the land, Pharaoh begs Moses to take his people and hit the road.

Their departure was marked with formality and ominous ritual. The slaying of a lamb, the spreading of blood, and the eating of an unusual feast. God has already told them that Pharaoh would change his mind and come after them, but he also assured them "*I will gain glory for myself through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD.*" They should know what's coming, but here's what we read,

*10 As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the Lord. 11 They said to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? 12 Didn't we say to you in Egypt, 'Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians'? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!"*

Imagine the rumbling thunder of hundreds of hoof beats. Those at the rear of the procession look over their shoulders and see a cloud of dust rising in West. They elbow their neighbor. Murmurs ripple through the crowd. Then something emerges from the dusty cloud. Hundreds of chariots. Thousands of soldiers, the tips of their spears glinting in the sun. It's a fearsome sight indeed.

Stretching out before them are the waters of the Red Sea. Murmurs quickly work their way from the back of the camp to the front. "Where can we go? Why would God lead us here?"

Verse 10 says, they "*they were terrified.*" And just that quickly all of God's promises are quickly forgotten. All of Moses' careful instructions a distant memory. Pharaoh's army is closing in fast. We are poorly armed, untrained, and unprepared, and trapped against the sea.

From a human point of view, it is a desperate situation. They despaired of defeat and death. They hurled accusations at Moses, "You brought us to the desert to die."

### **FEAR Takes Hold**

It's at this point that fear takes hold. They are afraid. They are afraid of the Egyptians. They're afraid of dying. They're afraid of dying a pointless death. They are not sure

where they are going, and they have no clue how they're going to get there. And through the lens of fear they are not even sure WHY they are going. Panic sets in.

With their future looking so uncertain, they view their past through fear-stained glasses. Fear has a way of making the past, no matter how miserable, seem more desirable than the fear of an uncertain future. Psychologist Virginia Satir once observed, "The certainty of misery is preferable to the misery of uncertainty."

They act like Moses dragged them out here against their will. *"Didn't we say to you in Egypt, 'Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians'? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!"*

### **The Desire to Go Back**

The miserable past looks like the good old days. You can almost hear them, "Slavery wasn't really that bad. At least we were alive. We had rice and beans to eat every day, and on special occasions we even got gruel. Sure, we got beaten once and a while, but it wasn't too severe." True we had to work 14 hours a day, 7 days a week, but look at what we built. It sure is impressive!"

The desire to go back would be a constant temptation for Israel every time the going got tough. In Numbers 14:3-4 after 10 of the 12 spies brought back a negative report after reconnoitering the Promised Land, the people grumbled, *"Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt."*

The truth is they were in bondage. They were miserable. They lived an agonizing existence and cried out to God for deliverance. In their suffering, they were more than happy to follow Moses in this great escape.

We're not all that different. One of our instincts when facing fear is the temptation to go back. When the present is too frightening, fear-tinged hindsight reconstructs our miserable past so that it doesn't seem so bad.

We want to go back to the familiar problems. We want to go back to our small minded thinking, to risk-free, unfaithful living. We go back to where we don't dare to dream and discover what God has for us. We want to go back to what is known and predictable.

We choose the toxic relationship we know, rather than learning new ways of loving, and cultivating new relationships with new patterns. We choose an addiction that enslaves us rather than building the courage to find freedom. We stay chained in self-destructive habits rather than discipline and train ourselves to learn something new.

The familiar misery is a narrative we know. We know the excuses so well. We know what to tell ourselves. We know what to tell others. Truth be told, we kind of enjoy complaining about it. We know just where to hide our vulnerabilities.

### **Afraid of Things that Never Happen**

The Israelites stated fear here is that they will die in the desert. That's why they are complaining. But their fear was completely ill-founded. They Egyptians didn't want to kill them. Pharaoh wanted to capture them and return them to slavery." They are afraid of something that's never going to happen.

Did you know that most of the things we fear will never happen? Studies show that 85 to 90% of our fears never happen? Our lives are filled with troubles that never occur. All of the stress and worry that's depressing us, that's keeping us up at night, that's churning our stomachs and slowly killing us is over things that will never happen.

Moses had a riot brewing. The people are going to kill him before the Egyptians ever have a chance. This is one of his first real tests as a leader, and despite all of his protests to God that he was a poor speaker, he uses his words wisely and effectively. He starts with this in verse 13, "*Do not be afraid.*" This is the most repeated command in the Bible. "Fear not."

### **Fear is a Feeling; Afraid is a Choice**

Of all our emotions, fear is by far the most challenging one that we face on a daily basis. We talk a lot today about worry, stress, and anxiety. These are all rooted in fear. Fear seems like this invisible force that influences all our decisions, chokes our hopes and dreams, and sucks the life out of our relationships, and yet the fact that the Bible so frequently commands us to not be afraid, including our Savior more than a dozen times, means that we always have a choice. You have the power to choose something other than fear.

We might be afraid of death, or we are simply afraid that our life is slipping through our fingers and we have little control. We are afraid of losing our jobs, or not having enough to retire. We are afraid we will never realize our dreams. We are afraid of the decisions our children are making and where that will lead them. We are afraid that a relationship is coming apart at the seams, or that our marriage will be a loveless and listless coexistence under one roof.

The first thing we have to learn is to tell our fear to be quiet. Fear is often the first voice we hear and it is the loudest voice. Trust whispers. Faith sings, but fear screams. Only

when we learn to quiet our fear, can we stop to think, pause to pray, and have the quietness to listen to God.

So, Moses says, "*Do not be afraid.*" He continues, "*Stand firm.*" He's not talking about their physical posture. He's not giving them geographical instructions. In just a little bit, they're going to be told to move, so standing firm is something else. Standing firm means staying calm and patiently waiting, but that doesn't mean doing nothing.

Standing firm is an emotional stance. It's a mental attitude. Don't let your mind run in a dozen different directions. When we're facing a difficult challenge, our brains like to run to a bunch of bad destinations. The human brain is capable of imagining a hundred of the worst endings possible. "Oh, no, it's all over. The whole things lost. This is never going work. It's all been for nothing." Does your brain ever tell you that stuff, or is it only my brain?

Part of this comes from a good place. It's a defense mechanism. It's something that God built into us to protect us. Fear is a natural feeling. God created it for a reason. It has a place and a purpose, and can save our lives and keep us from making horrible mistakes. It's part of our fight or flight instinct. The adrenaline starts pumping and we think, "We better do something, or this is going to end badly."

But when the danger is imagined, exaggerated, or we simply leave God out of the picture, then our fear becomes destructive. So, instead of panic, we need to stand firm.

Both sin and Satan want to take this natural instinct, this God-given part of our emotional makeup and use it against you. They exaggerate the threat. Sometimes the only thing that might be hurt is our pride, but we will do incredibly stupid things, and incredibly un-Jesus like things to avoid wounding our pride.

Standing firm is a commitment of the mind and of the will to not let the emotion of fear always get its way. We let it have its say, but we don't always let it have its way. Fear will try to convince you that the thing you're afraid of is the only thing that matters. It isn't. Consider this, when you're going the direction God wants, He's always on your side.

If you are where God wants you, there is no safer place to be, no matter what's going on around you. No matter the storm. No matter the threats. Now, if you're going in another direction, then the thing you have to fear the most, is God himself, and he will use legitimate fears to get your attention, to push you in the right direction.

**Your Greatest Fear; God's Greatest Glory**

"Fear not. Stand firm," Moses pleads, "and you will see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again."

The moment of your greatest fear, is also the moment of God's greatest glory. Think about that. If you were never in a pickle, if you never faced a mountain you couldn't climb, if you were never stuck in a jam you couldn't get out of, you would never see the glory of God at work in your life. For Israel to see the salvation of the Lord, they needed to face something to be saved from.

The same is true in our lives. You will never trust if you don't first have something of which to be afraid. It takes something to threaten you, for God to save you. We want to see his salvation and we want to see His glory but we want to do it without something to fear, without trouble. That's not how it works. Every enemy you face is another opportunity to trust, and another chance for God to show off.

Keep in mind, Moses isn't just saying this stuff to pacify the people. He's not a politician working the crowd. This isn't a stump speech where he's telling them what they want to hear. Moses means every word of this. His confidence comes from a place of faith. God has spoken to him. God has called him. God has led him. He wants the people to trust him, because he trusts God.

### **Don't Just Do Something; Stand There**

Then comes one of the greatest sentences ever spoken by Moses as a leader, and one of the greatest truths in Scripture, "*The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still.*"

This is a great verse, and it's one of my wife's favorite verses. We have a big plaque in our living room with this verse on it. But it's also one of those verses that we have to be careful with. It's easy to take out of context. It's easy to misapply it to other situations. This doesn't mean that we don't have to do anything. We can't sit back and do nothing. Be still is an unfortunate translation, because that's not what the Hebrew means. The ESV is much more accurate with what it says, "Be silent." God is saying, "Be quiet and listen."

It also is not a promise that God will always save the day. You can be a devoted Christian and still get fired from a job, go through a painful divorce, or receive a dreaded diagnosis. That's not what this verse means.

Letting the Lord fight for you always requires at least three things of you. 1.) First, you have to listen. Israel had to listen to God. They had to listen to Moses. If they didn't

listen, they wouldn't be saved. 2.) Second you have to trust. They had to trust God. They had to trust Moses. You have to have faith that God knows what he's doing, and that he will work for your ultimate good. Not necessarily your immediate comfort, or what you want in the short-term, but your ultimate good. 3.) Obedience. You have to go where God wants you to go and you have to do what God wants you to do. For Israel, that means going forward. They had to cross the Red Sea. They had to go to the other side. I think that had to be scary.

In children's Bibles, there are sometimes pictures of Israel crossing the Red Sea, and there's these cute little cartoon fish watching them from this wall of water, and there's little kids pointing and smiling. It's like a big adventure. I don't think it was like that at all. It was terrifying. But they trusted anyway. They went anyway.

God fighting for you requires your obedience. Listed in your bulletins are 5 other passages where God tells Israel they do not have to be afraid and he promises to also fight for them, but he also requires some act of obedience from them. Every time.

In Dt. 1 they have to go into the land God has called them to enter, even though they are afraid. In Dt. 3 it's the same thing. In Dt 20, they actually have to go to war with their enemies, even though God has promised to fight for them.

In 2 Chronicles 20:17 listen to this,

*You will not need to fight in this battle. Stand firm, hold your position, and see the salvation of the Lord on your behalf, O Judah and Jerusalem. Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed.*

That would be great, if it ended there. "Don't be afraid. Just hold your position and God will fight this battle for you." "Sure, Lord, I can do that. But realize, that in your fear even standing firm and holding your position takes a lot of faith. But listen to what God says next,

*"Tomorrow go out against them and the Lord will be with you."* Did you get that? God promised them they would not need to fight this battle, but he still required them to show up for battle.

First, you listen. Second, you trust. Third, you obey. Then, and only then can you not be afraid. Only when we do the first three, can we truly overcome our fear.

**Go Forward**

In life's battles, we are a participant, not a passive observer. But the Lord will fight for us. "Fight" here means to take up arms, to engage in battle, so as to overcome. If I get caught in a back alley with a couple of thugs, I'm toast, but if I happen to be with Francis Ngannou, the reigning UFC heavyweight champion, my attitude is completely different. If you're walking in obedience, then every battle you go into, you go with God on your side.

We worry and stress so much about battles we were never meant to fight. There are so many times we could simply be quiet. "*Be still*" here means to speechless, even to be mute. We have nothing to say, because nothing we say will make a difference. All of our demands, all of our declarations, all of our musings, and all of our questions are but noise when God fights on our behalf. It's just a distraction to what God is doing. Sometimes the best thing you can do is shut up, and let God do his thing.

After Moses speaks to the people, it's God's turn to speak, but God doesn't speak to the whole nation, he just speaks to Moses. I don't know if the others can overhear, but he wants Moses to take charge and get the people moving again, "*Why do you cry to me? Tell the people of Israel to go forward.*"

When we face a difficult challenge it is tempting to stand still and do nothing, or it is tempting to go back. Apparently, as they approached the Red Sea and Pharaoh's army approaches from behind, some of them despair and want to go back. Others of them just froze. They froze. The simmering waters of the sea in front of them and billowing clouds of dust rising from galloping hooves behind them, seemingly caught between the devil and the deep Red sea. And so they do nothing. God called them to stand firm. God called them to be quiet, but he didn't tell them to do nothing.

He says "Go forward."