

## NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

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Fear Not

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Merry Christmas, what a joy to be together as a church family. You know the interesting thing is that most of our church travels around Christmas but I know that we probably got some family that are visiting and so if you're a guest it's a joy to have you here and I just want to say this is special for me tonight because we've got some neighbors here which is really fun for us and then it's a little infrequent these days for Lora and I to have all three kids in a service and so Parker, Summer and Josiah are here and what a joy, and so welcome. I know we have our kids with us and so that's your insurance that this will not be the longest message I ever preached.

A few years ago I had a meeting with a DC council member. I don't remember much of what we talked about but I remember the last few minutes of our meeting. I asked him if I could pray for him and he got very quiet. And at first I wondered if I had offended him and then I realized that he was giving great thought to his answer and I was a little nervous that he might ask me to pray that he would win and I don't know if I could pray that or not, I don't know if that's fair, but he made a prayer request that is one of my all-time favorite prayer requests. He said, pray that I don't let fear dictate my decisions; I thought to myself yeah that's a prayer I can pray. And that's my prayer for you this Christmas. If you have a Bible you can turn to the Christmas story in Luke chapter two will get there in a moment.

But as I see it we have two choices we can let faith dictate our decisions; faith is being sure of what we hope for, certain of what we do not see but for our purposes this weekend I think faith is playing to win, or you can let fear dictate your decisions and I think fear is playing not to lose, and that's a very different way of living your life. Here's what I know for sure if you run away from what you're afraid of, you're going to be running your entire life. Your life will become defined by the things you fear and that's no way to live. Here's what happens over time if we aren't careful. We let fear become a puppeteer that pulls our emotional strings and our behavioral strings in ways that eventually we aren't even aware of. So you raise your hand and fourth grade history you're full of fourth grade confidence that you've got the right answer but it's the wrong answer and it's not the wrong answer that bothers you is the fact that your classmates laugh, and then you wonder why you lack confidence in the board room even when you have a great idea and there's a fraction of a second hesitation. I'll tell you why it's because of a deep-seated fear that you may be wrong or you may be embarrassed all over again and you let fear pull the strings. So what do you do? You start to organize your life in a way that allows you to avoid those situations that would trigger that fear, and you can fill in the blank with any fear you want; the fear of intimacy, the fear of failure, the fear of rejection, the fear of commitment. But I want you to know that Jesus said He came to set the captive free and fear is part of that package. We're only born with two fears; fear of falling, fear of loud noises. Every other fear is learned which means every other fear can be unlearned. Faith is the process of unlearning fear. First John 4:18 says "perfect love casts out all fear". See as we grow in our understanding of God's love for us you don't have to fear anything anymore. The net result of God's love is fearlessness. And I think that's a timely message as we celebrate Christmas and prepare for a new year.

The question is what does that have to do with the Christmas story in the answer is everything. Luke chapter 2, verse 8, here we go, "and there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field keeping watch over their flock by night and lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them and the glory of the Lord shone round about them and they were sore afraid". I kinda like the King James version right here. They weren't just afraid, they were sore afraid. Now can I tell you I'm a little sore today cause I went hiking with my kids yesterday. Now it wasn't the Inca Trail, the Machu Picchu, it was a Sky Meadow out by our Gainesville campus. But my kids keep a pretty good clip and they weren't waiting up for the old man and so I feel it a little bit today. Why do we get sore? We get sore when we over use something. I wonder if there is some of us this weekend that maybe are afraid but then if there are others who are sore afraid that you're letting fear dictate your decisions in a way that fear is getting the best of you, instead of God getting the best of you.

Let me zoom out and say this, I think Mary and Joseph experienced fear in all of its forms. Do you remember, parents if you have children with that first born there's a little bit of nervousness isn't there? A little kind of underlying fear; do I have what it takes to be a mom, to be a dad and there are so many uncertainties and so you've got nervousness. And I think Mary and Joseph like any new parents experienced that same nervousness. And then I think you've got financial anxiety; they were on their way to Bethlehem to pay taxes. Oh and then there's a death threat and they have to escape in the middle of the night and become refugees in Egypt. I mean this is the whole gamut of fear and we don't feel it because we're so far removed but fear is the reality of the Christmas story. They were sore afraid but here's the good news, verse 10, 'the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will, good will, good will toward men.' The very first thing that the angels pronounce is fear not and it shouldn't come as a surprise.

Those two words are one of the most repeated phrases in all of scripture. When God appeared to Abraham in a vision, the very first thing He said was fear not for I will protect you and then He appeared to his son Isaac same thing, He says fear not for I am with you and will bless you. What did God say to Moses when the Israelites are trapped between the Egyptian army and the red sea? God says a fear not, stand still and you will see the deliverance of the Lord. How about Joshua at the Jordan River? He says fear not, I will be with you as I was with Moses I will not fail you or abandon you. We get to the New Testament and what does the angel say to Joseph? Fear not, and how about Mary? Fear not! And what about when they're in the boat on the Sea of Galilee and a storm sweeps in through that valley? Jesus says fear not, I am with you and when he appears to John on the Isle of Patmos, He says fear not, I am the first and the last over and over and over again. God says fear not.

Fear not might not make the cover of many Christmas cards it doesn't even seem Christmassy right but this is not a subplot in the Christmas story, faith is the lead. It's the opening act, the opening sentence it is the message of Christmas. Now I'll come back to fear not but let me talk about good news of great joy. Let me talk about good will toward men because that's the heart of

the gospel, God with us and God for us. One of my favorite Christmas stories is about the little boy Benjamin who wanted a baby sister for Christmas and so he decided to write a letter to God. He sat down and wrote Dear God, I have been a very good boy and then stopped writing because he knew it wasn't true. And so he crumpled it up, threw it away and started again. Said Dear God, I've been a pretty good boy. Stop, not real motivational right? And so crumpled it up threw it away and he got a little different plan. Benjamin went into the bathroom grabbed a towel went back to the nativity scene underneath the Christmas tree and there were the statues of Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus and the shepherds. And you know, his mother had told him to never touch those figurines but he, he picked up the statue of Mary put it in a towel, folded it up, hid it under his bed and then sat down to write his letter again. Dear God if you ever want to see your mother again...Now listen we're not quite that overt but we do exactly what Benjamin did. We employ the same tactics to get what we want from God. We use bribery and blackmail. God if you do this I'll do that, or God if you don't do this I won't do that. But God doesn't need to be bribed or blackmailed. Why, because God is good. God's will is goodwill. That's what is the essence of this story.

A few years ago I was at the national prayer breakfast Eric Metaxas was giving the keynote that year and he said something so simple yet so profound. Would you take a minute just think about this? He said everything I rejected about God, was not God. Listen, most people who reject God aren't really rejecting God for who He is. They're rejecting God for who He isn't. In other words, they aren't really rejecting God they're rejecting a religious misrepresentation of who God is. Eric Metaxas said everything I rejected about God, was not God, it was religion it was people who go to church but don't show the love of Jesus, people who don't practice what they preach, people who are indifferent to the poor and the suffering. I had rejected that but guess what, Jesus had also rejected that.

Let me pull this thread just a little bit because this is so critical. The very first lie in the garden of Eden was it somehow God was holding out on Adam and Eve and a seed of doubt was planted to make Adam and Eve question the goodness of God, to wonder if maybe God was actually against them. Now, if we think that God is against us what we naturally do is position ourselves against God and then we reject Him for all the wrong reasons and what you end up with is a relationship that is fear based not love based and that isn't what God wants. A few years ago I spoke at a conference in England with the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby and after his talk there was a little Q&A and he was asked the question, the greatest challenge we face is Christ followers and without a moment's hesitation he said every Christian I meet cannot quite believe that they are loved by God. Can I tell you why I think that's true? Because our love is reactive because we're human God's love is proactive. God's love is not dictated by your actions, news flash. For better or for worse God doesn't love you because of who you are, God loves you because of who He is. The Bible says God is love and at the very heart of this Christmas story is a God who is trying so hard to convince us of that and He does it by sending His Son. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believe in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. Now you know the storyline at Bethlehem He's God with us, at Cavalry He's God for us. Listen you mean the cross to Christ and He proved His love for you at Cavalry, now at Pentecost, He's God in us right, so He's got with us, for us, in us. But I think what we've got to understand is that there is a God who is with us and for us in every way that we can imagine. One of my favorite Psalms says, "No good thing will God withhold from those

who walk uprightly before Him", I believe that. Jesus said it this way, "if sinful people know how to give good gifts to their children how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask Him". It is the nature of God to give. Come on how many of you been working real hard to find the right gift for somebody let me see your hands, you're working it, you're working it.

I'm really concerned right now cause three of you are working it. How many of you are working it, you're putting some effort into this gift-giving thing, can I see your hands? Ok, some of you are working it some of you, I don't know what's happening. I mean we work pretty hard to find the right gift and I want you to know that's the heart of God. Let me just make sure that on a weekend like this that we understand the Gospel because when it says good news of great joy. Good news is this word Gospel it's simply this. II Corinthians 5, "God made him who had no sin to become sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God". In other words here's the deal that's on the table, Jesus went to the cross and by doing so said why don't you let me pay the penalty for sin, let me take care of that you transfer your sin to my account and I'll pay it in full but that's only half the Gospel the other half is this He says why don't I take my righteousness and transfer it to your account and then we'll call it even. Come on what a deal that, it's good news it's the Gospel. And I don't know this might be a wonderful weekend as we celebrate Christmas, to simply receive that free give you can't earn it, you can only receive it by faith, it's God's grace.

Now let me go back to fear not. You're doing great and the kids are doing great, kids are doing great. A few decades ago a pair of psychologists from the University of Michigan, fascinating study on fear hooked up some volunteers within electrode cap and that cap enabled them to analyze brain activity in response to winning and losing during a computer simulated betting game. Are you still with me? With each bet, the medial frontal cortex showed in increased electrical activity within a matter of milliseconds, so the medial frontal cortex was firing, but what intrigued the researchers was this, medial frontal negativity showed a larger dip after a loss than the rise in medial frontal positivity after a win. Researchers came to this simple conclusion, losses loom larger than gains, in other words, the aversion to loss of a certain magnitude is greater than the attraction to gain of the same magnitude; technical term 'loss aversion'. This is where I come back to the gospel because I think so much of it it is about overcoming this aversion to loss, this living life playing not to lose. I mean if you look at the Gospel through this angle is pretty amazing, I mean Jesus tells a story about a shepherd who leaves ninety-nine sheep to go after one. You got to overcome some loss aversion if you're going to leave ninety-nine on the table to go after one, and what about the parable of the talent? The guy who hid his talent in the ground, why did he do it? The Bible says he was afraid, he let fear dictate his decision so he was playing not to lose; he was trying to avoid loss. Story after story, but there is a God who wants to set us free from fear so that we can live by faith. Let me close with this, you know it seems to me that people had two very different reactions to negative experiences. I think some people, those negative experiences put them in a prison of fear and they live the rest of their life trying to avoid that kind of situation. And then there are those who it seems like negative experiences set them free from the very thing they were afraid of, I'll give you an example, on the evening of January 30, 1956, Dr Martin Luther King was speaking at First Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. While he was speaking was informed that his house had been bombed. He excuses himself, goes home, his wife, their daughter they're okay they're shaken, he calms

everybody down because this was about to turn into a riot. Calms everybody down and he's sitting at his kitchen table that night and he says he hears a voice. And the voice says Martin, do not be afraid. Isn't it interesting that sometimes when the thing you fear happens to you it actually sets you free? Now I've told this a hundred times so I'll give you the very short version, our first attempt at church planning was a fail and I'll be on it, you know playing basketball in college being pretty competitive to a fault man, I have a high fear of failure but I'll tell you this what I learned from that experience is the cure for the fear of failure is not success its failure in small enough doses that you build up an immunity to it because what I discovered is that when you succeed God says I love you and when you fail God says I love you and when you have faith God says I love you and when you have fear God says I love you, it doesn't matter what kind of situation. And I discovered that in the midst of that fail there was a God who was there to pick me back up dust me off and give me a second chance. Listen, fear not, for I am with you, fear not, I am for you. There is a God who is saying that to you, this weekend let me let Dr King have the last word. He said you may be 38 years old as I happen to be and one day some great opportunity stands before you and cause you to stand up for some great principle, some great issue, some great cause and you refuse to do it because you are afraid. You refuse to do it because you want to live longer, you're afraid that you will lose your job or you are afraid that you will be criticized or that you lose your popularity or you're afraid that somebody will stab you or shoot you or bomb your house, so you refuse to take the stand. Well, you may go on and live until you are 90 but you're just as dead at 38 as you would be at 90 and the cessation of breathing in your life is but the belated announcement of an earlier death of the spirit. Fear not, I bring you good tidings of great joy, peace on earth, good will toward men.

Let's pray. Father thank you, thank you for your grace, thank you for your goodness, thank you for the way that you love us, thank you that you're the God who will never leave us nor forsake us. Lord, I pray, as we celebrate this Christmas season, as we prepare for a new year I just want to believe that fear is not going to be the thing that defines our lives, that are going to define us in this coming year that we're not going to let fear dictate our decisions, but we're going to live by faith. We're not going to play not to lose, we're going to play to win. Why, because He began a good work in us is going to carry it to completion because all things work together for good to them to love God and are called according to His purpose because you have prepared good works in advance. Because you are able to do a measurably more than all we can ask or imagine according to your power that's at work within us. Because no good thing will you withhold from those who walk uprightly before you because your Word does not return void because you are watching over your promise to bring it to fulfillment. And so we give you praise and thanks in Jesus name. Amen