



Date: August 7, 2016

Title: "Fear Not, But WATCH OUT!"

Scripture: Luke 12: 32-40

Description: How to combat fear, and how to stay alert for opportunities of goodness and beauty.

Take a breath. Hold it. Hold it. Is that something like what fear feels like to you? Pain is more intense, as in "a raging headache" or "stabbing pain". Passion feels like fire, as in "fire in the belly," or "light my fire." But fear is suffocating. People having a panic attack say they feel like they can't breathe, like they're going to pass out. Hold your breath. Physically, is that what fear feels like? Suntrust thinks it does. See Suntrust ad: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tHM2zrM2N9I>

This ad says that fear comes from not having enough. The answer to fear is financial. Jesus disagreed. Jesus said that fear is relational, and the answer to fear is love. Here's the antibody for fear: love. "Well-formed love banishes fear." When faced with threats, scripture urges us not, "Be on guard!" or "Defend yourselves!" but rather, "Love!"

"Fear not, *little flock*. If you're afraid, wouldn't you rather Jesus have said, "Fear not, big guy," or "Fear not, Ninja Warrior." "Little flock" acknowledges a bleak reality: compared to the threats of harm, a little flock is pretty defenseless. This is a harsh planet; we are a vulnerable species. To address that, getting stronger, seeking safety, building a robust defense system is not the place to go. "God is our refuge and strength,...therefore we will not fear," Psalm 46 begins. Your fear won't get under control by *you* getting stronger but by your trust in God's care getting stronger.

"...for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." (v. 32)

Their child—their only child—was going camping with her best friend forever cousin and the cousin's parents, Uncle Jason and Aunt Jessica. The list of instructions ran on for three pages: she likes oatmeal, but not with cream on it; we've packed an outfit for every day in separate zip locks, each labeled with the day. She can swim the length of the pool, but she's never been in a lake, so please have her wear a life vest anytime she's near water. She'll need sunscreen, insect repellent, lip balm, and extra Band-Aids for blisters.... you get the idea.

Uncle Jason listened to these instructions carefully, took the list and folded it, put it in his pocket. "Now, here's a list of things you need to know while she's camping with us. One item on that list: your little girl is our little girl's very, very best friend. Which means she is more precious to us than anything. Anything. We will do everything to keep her from harm, and to allow her to have a great time." That's the content of God's personal security message to you: "You are precious to me. Got it?" Now, what was it that was worrying you?

You don't have to earn protection, you don't have to stockpile your personal weapons arsenal or a Fort Knox full of sure-fire investments. You can accumulate wealth and weapons that way, but you can't acquire security or freedom from fear. Your well-being is a gift, given by someone who takes enormous pleasure in seeing you, alive and well, joyful and flourishing.

Your life may be as fragile as a soap bubble. Don't waste your time inventing ways to protect, preserve, and defend your bubble. You don't need to; you know the bubble-making machine! You trust the One who loves to see you as alive and joyful as a toddler chasing bubbles across the lawn, one whose bubble machine always has more in store for you.

Want something to do about your fear, something you can put into practice immediately? Jesus doesn't tell you to breathe deeply and chant "ohmmm" and envision world peace. He wants you to get into gear. Jesus doesn't care how you feel; Jesus cares about what you do.

Your actions will shape the way you feel. You don't feel like running today, or swimming, or whatever form of exercise you've chosen? Go outside and get started. After a few minutes, your body will get into it and before long you'll be in the "zone." You don't feel like practicing the piano? So practice the piano anyway. Tomorrow when your heart is breaking, playing the piano may be your source of consolation, or the piano may be your release of joy when a day is so beautiful you think you may explode. Your actions shape your feelings.

Do this: "Sell your possessions, and give alms." (v.33) You're made in your Father's image. Your Father takes great pleasure in giving to you. Your own break out from fear is the same path of your Father--giving. "Sell your possessions, and give alms." That is sooo counterintuitive. Logic says if you're afraid of all the contingencies, then buy some insurance, sell your stocks and invest in bonds or gold or South African Krugerrands. Nope. Jesus's plan is just the opposite. You are going to find so much pleasure in giving that you'll forget to be afraid. Eventually your possessions are going to be taken from you anyway, so by giving, you at least get to control where they go. And by giving, you're building community. No hardship in the world can take away friendship. In fact, friendship feeds on hardship. By giving, you discover how free you can be with so much less you need to protect.

"An unfailing treasure in heaven..." Let me throw you a curve on this one. "Heaven" is where you hope to go after you die, right? Pearly gates, streets paved with gold, harps and wings. (By the way, does it strike you as strange that we're not supposed to desire riches, yet heaven is a place with flamboyant, grandiose riches?) Heaven is all of that, and so much more. Heaven is when the invisible realities replace the tangible stuff that counterfeits as reality. Heaven isn't the three carat diamond on your finger, it's the heart of someone who loves you. Heaven isn't the trophy at the end

of playoffs, it's your child falling in love with a game and being part of a team of new friends. Store up an "unfailing treasure" of things you can't see, like confidence, or hope, or peace or loyalty; the "real" stuff that clutters your life will be worthless by comparison. "Make purses that do not wear out." Such as memories, or friendships. If you treasure these things, no one can ever take them away.

"Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit." Then Jesus describes servants staying on alert for when their master returns. They're watching for something good to happen. The master has been at a wedding; he's going to return happy and filled with stories about the crazy things that always happen at weddings.

You can interpret this as meaning that Jesus may return any day now; so behave yourselves. Okay. You can buy a lottery ticket too, only I wouldn't build my life around the chances of winning.

What if the story is about how rich and good opportunities present themselves, only you can miss them if you're not awake. Because such "treasures" come unexpectedly, and are gone in a heartbeat. You don't want to miss them.

I was driving to work on Pleasant Hill Road one morning, the traffic backed up in the other direction forever. A car pulls into the left turn lane several hundred yards before the intersection with Peachtree Industrial. Cars do that all the time. This time, Duluth's Finest is waiting, watching, as they do two or three times a week. The patrol car pulls behind our left-turning friend and turns on his blue lights. The driver, a young black male, turns into the CVS Pharmacy parking lot to receive his ticket. As he slows to a stop, the police car turns on the siren as well as the lights. "That's strange," I thought. "He was clearly stopping. Why the siren?" Emotions of both parties involved could be running high. Perhaps I should pull into the CVS lot also, not to get up in their business, but to be near enough that they would know someone was watching, so a police officer would be protected from unwarranted accusations, or that an African American man gets treated with respect.

"Nah." I thought, and continued driving to work. When I reached the next traffic light, I changed my mind. Too late. It would have taken twenty minutes to make it back to the CVS. The opportunity to be a good citizen came and went in a heartbeat. "Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit."

Have you heard of Dr. Joy Degruy? Listen to what happened to her in the checkout line at the grocery store:

This isn't a sermon about racism. You can hear that in this video, but that's not my point. I'm wanting you to remember the sister-in-law and the two white women standing in line who had a brief opportunity to do good, *and they took advantage of that opportunity*. Such opportunities don't schedule appointments ahead of time, to make sure they're on your calendar. They appear suddenly by surprise, and "blessed are those servants" who are alert and ready.

You can be so blinded by fear that you become blind to the good things. (I'd like to tell you about my hiking trip in Alaska, when I was almost oblivious to the breathtaking beauty because we'd seen bear tracks near our campsite. Later, looking at our pictures, I thought, "Wow, those glaciers were really beautiful!" But I hadn't even seen them because I was afraid there were bears nearby. I'd tell you about that, but it would add ten minutes to the sermon.) You can be so blinded by fear that you become blind to the good things. Be alert to "the master," the source of all goodness, so that when he arrives, even in the darkest midnight, you have eyes to see.

I'm ready to end this sermon. But Jesus didn't stop there. Instead, he tells another story about a thief burglarizing your house in the middle of the night. Truth is, just like opportunities for good, bad things also happen in an instant and can take us by surprise. On the drive to the emergency room, giving a deposition to your attorney, getting prepped for chemotherapy is not the time to upgrade your treasure portfolio. Unseen treasures, the only kind of treasures that really matter, are not available in instant packages. Moth and rust have zero effect on unseen treasures, but those treasures are not available on demand. They have to grow on you. They have to grow in you. Be ready.

I'm going to end where I started, which I thought was the best sentence of the morning. "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." Amen.