

Fear . . . and God

Isaiah 43:1-7

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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¹ *But now thus says the LORD,
who created you, O Jacob, who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.*

² *When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.*

³ *For I am the LORD your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.
I give Egypt as your ransom,
Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.*

⁴ *Because you are precious in my sight,
and honored, and I love you,
I give people in return for you,
nations in exchange for your life.*

⁵ *Do not fear, for I am with you;
I will bring your offspring from the east,
and from the west I will gather you;*

⁶ *I will say to the north, "Give them up,"
and to the south, "Do not withhold;
bring my sons from far away
and my daughters from the end of the earth—*

⁷ *everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made."*

I

Each of us here this morning knows what it is to be afraid. I have a friend who has an unusual and chronic disease that's notoriously difficult to treat. In a desperate search for better health, he has traveled to several cities to consult with specialists in big-name medical centers. One of these specialists finally told him, "Yes, I know what your disease is and I know how to treat it. But you're not going to like the treatment. It will take a long time. Before you get better, you're going to feel a lot worse than you already do right now. It will exhaust you. Quite frankly, you should know the treatment is so bad that some patients choose to stop part of

the way through. Some people don't make it. You are going to need all the courage and hope you can muster.”

My friend wants to feel better in the long run, so he's going to accept the treatment. Yet in the short run, he's afraid of what lies ahead.

II

Fear has many sources. We could be afraid the economy will falter—afraid we'll fail in our line of work—afraid of dreadful things that might happen to our children—afraid of dying young—afraid of violence—afraid of what other people might do to us.

Coretta Scott King, the wife of Martin Luther King, Jr., published a memoir in 1969 just after her husband was assassinated. In this memoir she describes the fear that she and other black people experienced in the American south from the 1930s through the 1960s. One story Coretta tells from her childhood in rural Alabama is of her father, Obadiah Scott, who by honesty, hard-work, and extreme patience managed to earn a livable income in spite of repression and threats from white people. At one point her father owned a pickup truck which he used to deliver lumber to other people for a small fee. His delivery business became successful enough that some poor white people saw him as a threat. So sometimes groups of whites would stop her father on lonely roads, curse him, and threaten to kill him. This wasn't an idle death threat, because whites had earlier lynched one of Coretta's great uncles—they hung him by his neck from a tree and then shot his body with bullets. Despite the threats, Coretta's father wasn't murdered, even though later on resentful whites burned down another of her father's business ventures—a sawmill which he had hoped would give his family a steady income. After telling these stories, Coretta writes that “I learned very early [in life] to live with fear for the people I loved.”ⁱ As a black person, one could never predict when

white people might threaten you, injure you, fine you, charge you unfair and exorbitant interest, jail you, or lynch you.

Coretta fears increased in the 1950s after she married Martin Luther King Jr., and the Civil Rights movement began. During the years when they lived in Birmingham, Alabama, and Martin was pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, they received numerous death threats by anonymous callers on the telephone. Nasty letters were mailed to their house. Their house was even bombed one night as whites tried to use the power of fear to stop the Kings from their leadership role for civil rights. Fear became their constant companion.

III

The 43rd chapter of Isaiah speaks to the fears that hinder us. In verse 1 and again in verse 5, God says: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you. . . . Do not fear, for I am with you.” These words were originally spoken to Jews living somewhere in the Babylonian empire, around 540 BCE. By this point in history, the Jewish people were scattered across the ancient near east, with some living in Babylon, some in Palestine, and an unknown number living in areas of the former Assyrian empire. We may imagine these Jewish people were afraid of what would happen in the future. Would they survive as a people, or would history sweep them away into oblivion? And if they survived, how unpleasant would the Babylonians make their lives? How would their faith in Yahweh overcome the trauma of the exile? They did not know the answers to these questions—and that very uncertainty was a big part of why they were afraid.

Into that context, God spoke assurance. I, God, created you; and I, God, will save you. I call you by name. I will ransom you. You are precious to me and I love you. I am with you. You do not have to be so afraid. Be at peace.

IV

During the civil rights movement, God spoke similar words of assurance to Martin Luther and Coretta Scott King. We can do no better than to hear Coretta tell this story in her own words. First she describes how God's assurance came to her husband, and then a few days later, how it came to her.

For my husband, Martin Luther King, Jr. prayer was a daily source of courage and strength that gave him the ability to carry on in even the darkest hours of our struggle. I remember one very difficult day when he came home bone-weary from the stress that came with his leadership of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. In the middle of that night, he was awakened by a threatening and abusive phone call, one of many we received throughout the movement. On this particular occasion, however, Martin had had enough.

After the call, he got up from bed and made himself some coffee. He began to worry about his family, and all of the burdens that came with our movement weighed heavily on his soul. With his head in his hands, Martin bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud to God: "Lord, I am taking a stand for what I believe is right. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I have come to the point where I can't face it alone."

Later he told me, "At that moment, I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced Him before. It seemed as though I could hear a voice saying: 'Stand up for righteousness; stand up for truth; and God will be at our side forever.'" When Martin stood up from the table, he was imbued with a new sense of confidence, and he was ready to face anything.

I believe that this prayer was a critical turning point for the African-American freedom struggle, because from that point forward, we had a leader who was divinely inspired and could not be turned back by threats or any form of violence. . . .

A few nights after Martin's moment of truth, I had mine. I was sitting in my living room in Montgomery, chatting with a friend, while my new baby daughter, Yolanda, was asleep in the back room. Suddenly, we heard a loud thump on the front porch. Because of all the recent threats, I urged my friend to get up. "It sounds as if someone has hit the house [with a bomb]. We'd better move to the back."

As we moved toward the back, we felt a thunderous blast, followed by shattering glass and billowing smoke. I hurried to Yolanda's room and thanked God that she was all right. I called the church where my husband was speaking, but he was addressing the audience at the time. He called me back shortly afterward as a large crowd gathered at our house, and then he rushed home.

The crowd was angry at what had happened, and there was a lot of tension between the police and those who had gathered, some of whom were armed with guns, rocks, and bottles. In the midst of all of the turmoil, I said a silent prayer for the protection of our family and the restoration of peace. Then Martin began to speak to the crowd from the front porch of our home. "My wife and baby are all right," he said. "I want you to go home and put down your weapons. We cannot solve this problem through retaliatory violence. We must meet violence with nonviolence."

As Martin continued to speak, I was enveloped by a growing calm. "God is with us," I thought. "God is truly with us." The fear and anger around me began to melt like the receding snows of spring. Almost at that moment,

Martin concluded his remarks to the crowd: “Remember, if I am stopped, this movement will not stop, because God is with this movement. Go home with this glowing faith and this radiant assurance.”

Martin’s speech on that day was yet another crucial turning point for our freedom struggle because it set the tone of nonviolence that gave our movement its unique credibility and enabled all of the victories we achieved under his leadership.

From that day on, I was fully prepared for my role as Martin’s wife and partner in the struggle. There would be many more days of difficulty and worry, and there would be many more prayers. But the unwavering belief that we were doing God’s work became a daily source of faith and courage that undergirded our freedom movement.ⁱⁱ

V

To a fearful Jewish people trying to survive the Babylonian empire, God spoke words of assurance. To Coretta Scott and Martin Luther King, engaged in the mission of liberation, God spoke words of assurance. To us and our fears, God also speaks words of assurance. So I leave you with three questions for the coming week.

- What are you most deeply afraid of?
- How are you praying about this fear? Martin and Coretta prayed through their fears. How are you doing that?
- What is God doing to redeem you from that fear—to give you courage and hope?

ⁱ Coretta Scott King, *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), 27.

ⁱⁱ Coretta Scott King, “How We Open Our Hearts to God,”
<http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Christianity/2004/01/How-We-Open-Our-Hearts-To-God.aspx>, accessed
November 30, 2012.