



Be Not Afraid

A revised version of a homily for the XII Sunday,
given June 24-25 at St. Francis of Assisi in Bend

When we meet for the first time, I already know this about you: you are afraid. I am too. We've been afraid for as long as we can remember.

As little children we're afraid of the dark, of the shouting of adults, of being left all alone. As teens we fear the opposite sex and the disapproval of our peers. As adults we're anxious about what the future may bring: joblessness, homelessness, illness, death. Fear of one sort or another is our life-long companion.

It all goes back to the beginning. In the third chapter of the first book of the Bible fear makes its appearance on the stage of human history. "I heard the sound of You in the garden," Adam says to God, "and I was *afraid*." Fresh from committing the first sin, Adam knows God is searching for him; so he hides himself in the darkness of fear. All our fears are rooted in that original fear of Adam – the fear of facing God.

Throughout the pages of Scripture God searches out this fear and confronts it directly. "Be not afraid," He tells Abraham and Moses in the Old Testament, Mary and Joseph and the chosen disciples in the New.

To each of them, as to you and me, He gives a reason not to surrender to fear; and that reason is a promise, always the same promise: "*I will be with you.*"

The Son of God, Emmanuel, fulfilled this promise beyond our imagining when He came to redeem us from fear. In the dark night of Gethsemane Jesus went apart from the Apostles to face fear head on in the infinite loneliness of the Agony in the Garden. There He confronted the terrible dread that blackened the remaining hours of His life. "[R]emove this chalice from me," He begged His Father, as fear washed over Him in "great drops" of bloody sweat—a sign of the horrific dread of abandonment to which He gave "loud voice" on the Cross: "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?"

Jesus' agonizing "*why?*" met with silence from heaven and was buried with Him in a nearby tomb. But on the Third Day the answer burst forth. The Son had been abandoned to defeat in order to rise indestructible in victory and open the way out of Adam's fearful hiding place. Over the life He lives now death has no dominion—nor does fear. For when Jesus rose from the dead, His courage rose with Him, courage that conquers fear completely. Those who live His new life live His courage too.

St. Paul did. The great Apostle had much to be afraid of, but he suffered through his fears and lived beyond them. Neither shipwreck nor stoning nor "countless beatings" nor imprisonments kept him from facing new and frightful dangers from rivers and robbers, from Jews and Gentiles, in the city

and in the wilderness. "I can do all things in Him Who strengthens me," St. Paul discovered. The Passion of his crucified Lord gave him courage to stand firm in the face of every threat that came his way. St. John describes this lesson learned from the Cross: "Perfect love casts out fear."

When I showed up in the emergency room throbbing with pain from a kidney stone, the doctor said, "I'm going to give you some morphine now. It won't take the pain away, but it *will put it at a distance* so you'll be able to bear it." The pain—and the fear—would still be there, but its oversized prominence, taking over my entire consciousness, would diminish in scale to its proper proportion so that my mind had room for more than just pain.

When we summon the courage to bring our terrors to light against the backdrop of Jesus' perfect love on the Cross, His grace helps us *re-dimension* them in proportion to what He suffered for us. That is how Jesus redeems our fear: He puts it at a distance and makes the unbearable *bearable*. He gives us unimagined strength to live our way through fear without being broken in two.

Before St. Augustine Pak Chong-wan and his wife suffered martyrdom in Korea in 1839, brutal tormenters robbed them of the use of their arms and legs. They were not intimidated. "I used to be afraid of tortures," St. Barbara Ko Sun-i said, "but now the Holy Spirit has blessed a sinner like me, and I am no longer afraid of tortures. I am so happy. I didn't know it was so easy to die."