

WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS NOW FAITH LIKE A MOUNTAIN DECEMBER 6 2009
ST. LUKE'S UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
M. KENT MILLARD

Last Sunday on the first Sunday of Advent, we thought about how we need hope like a rainbow and we gave out little rainbow stickers for us to wear so we are constantly reminded to live with hope.

Today, on the second Sunday of Advent, we will focus on having FAITH LIKE A MOUNTAIN. People tend to either have a mountain of fear within them or a mountain of faith within them.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, is an example of one who moved from a mountain of fear to a mountain of faith. The Angel Gabriel appeared to Mary at her home in Nazareth and Mary responded with fear and anxiety at his appearance. Then Gabriel encouraged her not to be afraid and to trust God. Here is how Luke tells that part of the story.

Read Luke 1:30-31; 38. *The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.'* Then the angel departed from her. THE ANGEL SAID, "DO NOT BE AFRAID, MARY" ...MARY SAID, "HERE AM I...LET IT BE TO ME ACCORDING TO YOUR WORD."

When Jesus grew up and began preaching, teaching and healing all over Galilee, his disciples were continually filled with a mountain of fear and he had to remind them over and over to trust God with their lives. Here is one of the occasions where Jesus encouraged his followers to overcome fear with faith.

Read Matthew 8:23-26. *And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. A gale arose on the lake, so great that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. And they went and woke him up, saying, 'Lord, save us! We are perishing!'* And he said to them, 'Why are you afraid, you of little faith?' Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm. Jesus said to them, "WHY ARE YOU AFRAID, YOU OF LITTLE FAITH?"

Prayer

Recently the *Boston Globe Newspaper* did a survey of the top ten fears of the American people.

The number one fear of about 50% of the American people is public speaking - giving a speech, talk or sermon in front of a group of people.

The number two fear of about 40% of the American people is fear of snakes, spiders and insects.

The number three fear of about 30% of the American people is fear of heights or confined spaces.

Other people had fears of job loss, terrorists, flying, crowds, thunder and lightning, or drowning.

There are a lot of things in this world which can generate fear, anxiety or worry in our hearts.

Recently, the Lilly Pharmaceutical Company announced that they would be laying off about 500 of their 5,000 employees here in Indianapolis. We have a number of people in our congregation who are

employed at Lilly and several have told me that they might be losing their jobs with Lilly in the near future and the prospect of losing their job generates some fear in their hearts.

I once read that all new born babies are born with only two fears: the fear of falling and the fear of loud noises. All the other fears we have about life we develop as we grow up.

I suspect that each of us could make our own list of the things that generate fear in our hearts and minds. What are the fears and anxieties which you carry in your heart today?

If you have ever had an occasion where you have had fear in your heart over one thing or another, then you know how Mary felt when the Angel Gabriel suddenly appeared to her and told her that she would conceive and bear a son who would become the Son of the God.

When the angel appeared to Mary she was filled with fear over this sudden, unexpected appearance of a heavenly visitor in her life. Then Gabriel said: "DO NOT BE AFRAID, MARY, FOR YOU HAVE FOUND FAVOR WITH GOD."

After listening to the angel's words, Mary responds with a statement of faith and surrender. Mary said: "HERE AM I, THE SERVANT OF THE LORD: LET IT BE WITH ME ACCORDING TO YOUR WORD."

Her mountain of fear dissolves and becomes a mountain of faith as she trusts God and surrenders herself into the hands of God.

It is interesting to me that the first words of a messenger from God to human beings in the Christmas story are always the same. When the angel appears to Zechariah his first words are DON'T BE AFRAID, ZECHARIAH.

When the angel appears to Joseph, his first words are JOSEPH, DON'T BE AFRAID. When the angels appear to the shepherds in the field their first words to the shepherds are "DON'T BE AFRAID. WE BRING YOU GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY."

There is something about us human beings that when something unexpected or unknown or new happens in our lives our first response is fear. We become filled with fear and fear itself exacerbates our situation and makes it much worse.

That is why whenever we are filled with fear over anything the first message from God to human beings is always the same: DON'T BE AFRAID. Fear will always make our problems worse.

So whatever challenges we may be facing now, the messenger from God would say to each of us today: DON'T BE AFRAID. Just face your fear and let it go but don't let it determine your life.

My prayer is that all of us can move from the prison of fear to the freedom of faith; from tenseness about life to trust in God.

When Jesus grew up he had the same problem with his disciples. On one occasion, Jesus and his disciples were in a boat crossing the Sea of Galilee. Jesus was asleep in the back of the boat, a windstorm arose, waves were coming over the edge of the boat and the disciples became filled with fear of losing their lives.

The disciples woke Jesus up in a panic saying: SAVE US, LORD, WE ARE PERISHING.

Jesus awoke and said: WHY ARE YOU AFRAID, YOU OF LITTLE FAITH. Then he calmed the winds and the sea.

I think Jesus would say to all of us today in the midst of our fearful situations: WHY ARE YOU AFRAID, YOU OF LITTLE FAITH. DON'T YOU KNOW THAT I AM ALWAYS WITH YOU? NO MATTER WHAT HAPPENS YOU ARE ALWAYS SAFE IN MY LOVING HANDS. TRUST ME.

We always have a choice; we can look at the storms around us and the challenges of our lives with fear or faith. When we look with fear we become unable to sleep peacefully, we get ulcers and heart attacks, and we create havoc and anxiety all around us.

When we respond with faith and trust in God, we become a peaceful, non-anxious presence in the world and life works out better for us and all those around us.

The letters of fear, F E A R, are sometimes defined as FALSE EVIDENCE APPEARING REAL. F E A R means false evidence which appears to us as real but it really isn't real.

I tried to think of what the letters of faith, F A I T H might mean and came up with this acronym: F AITH means FEARLESSLY, ALWAYS I TRUST HIM/HER, whichever image of God you prefer. Faith is to be fearless in the face of challenges and always trusting in God.

My wife loves cats. For about 17 years we had a dearly loved cat named Taki. Taki died a couple of years ago and Minnietta said that she would never get another cat because it hurt too much when they grow old and die. So for about a year we didn't have a cat. But Minnietta frequently went to visit friends who had cats so she could pet them and give them attention.

Finally, one of her friends told her it was time for her to get a cat of her own again. She heard about a woman who was giving away kittens. Minnietta told me that she was just going to look at one of the kittens but she wasn't going to get one.

However, when she returned she brought not one but two baby kittens; she explained that they were so cute and they were cousins and had always been together and she couldn't separate them. She said we would just keep them for a week to see how she liked them but I noticed that she bought enough cat food to last a year. We now have two cats living in our home with us.

However, I have noticed the difference between these two cats. One cat I call Scaredy Cat because she is afraid of everything. When you walk into a room her first response is always to run and hide. Whenever someone new comes to our home she runs upstairs and hides under the bed until they leave.

The other cat I call Fearless because he loves it when strangers come to our house and he walks around their legs and purrs as if they were his new best friend. He has no fear of anyone and makes friends with whoever comes to our house.

Both cats face the same situation; a stranger comes into our house and one cat reacts with fear and the other is fearless.

It occurred to me that sometimes we are all like Scaredy Cat; something new happens or change occurs in our lives and our first response is to hide in fear.

And sometimes we are like Fearless, when something new or different happens in our lives, we befriend it and face it without fear.

The angel said: DON'T BE AFRAID and Mary responded by saying: HERE I AM...LET IT BE TO ME ACCORDING TO YOUR WORD.

There is an old saying which says: FEAR KNOCKED AT THE DOOR, FAITH ANSWERED AND NO ONE WAS THERE.

Fear knocks at the door of all of our lives at one time or another. Illness occurs, a job is lost, business declines, worship attendance declines, divorce comes or any other challenge in life comes to the door of our lives.

When we hide behind our door and refuse to face the fears that come, they grow larger and larger in our mind's eye and paralyze us from taking effective action.

However, when we pray and when we surrender our lives into the hands of God like Mary did and when we trust that God will be with us no matter what challenge we face, then we can open the door with faith in the God who is beside us and we will discover that our fear disappears.

Fear knocked at the door of our lives, faith answered and no one was there.

I serve on the national United Methodist Global AIDS committee chaired by my good friend Dr. Donald Messer. Last Tuesday was World AIDS day and we went to Nashville, Tennessee to hear Don preach at the World AIDS day service at the Upper Room Chapel where the Upper Room daily devotional guide is published.

Don shared with us that over the past four years we have raised over \$2 million for the Global AIDS fund from churches all over the nation and have funded over 100 different AIDS ministry projects in 25 different nations of the world.

Don also shared with us the most recent issue of NEW WORLD OUTLOOK which is the missions magazine of the United Methodist Church and which focuses on the work of the Global AIDS committee in helping to make the world AIDS FREE. St. Luke's has given thousands of dollars over the last several years to give hope to people living with AIDS and this magazine tells how some of our gifts have been used to save lives around the world.

You can imagine that when AIDS knocks at the door of a family's home in Africa or Asia it causes great fear, disruption and pain. When it is discovered that a person in a family is HIV positive or has AIDS, they will often be fired from their job, excluded from their church, abandoned by their friends, and sometimes rejected by their own families.

That is what happened to a woman named Zipporah in Kenya. When her husband died of AIDS and it was discovered that Zipporah was HIV positive she and her four children were excluded from the community. No one would have anything to do with them and they were slowly starving to death.

The Methodist Church in her community was the first congregation to reach out and accept and love families who were living with this dreaded and life threatening disease.

Zipporah and her children were welcomed into the Methodist church and she was given the life saving AIDS medication through your gifts to the Global AIDS fund. Zipporah was also given a job at the Methodist Hospital in housecleaning so that today she would describe herself as HIV POSITIVE AND LIVING POSITIVELY. She is putting her four children through school and her eldest daughter started college this fall.

AIDS knocked at the door of Zipporah's home and she met it with faith in God and with the help of compassionate Christians here and around the world, she and her family are living victoriously in the midst of this critical and life threatening illness.

When she was interviewed for this article in New World Outlook, the interviewer saw these words which she had written on her front door with chalk:

THE LORD IS OUR SHEPHERD; THERE IS NOTHING TO FEAR from the 23rd Psalm.

AIDS knocked at the door of her home, took her husband away, and friends abandoned them but Zepporah's faith was so strong that she wrote these words to remind herself and her children that God is our shepherd; God will always be with us in every situation, therefore we have nothing to fear.

Every time she or her children go in or out of their simple one room house, they see these words written on the door and are reminded that since God our shepherd is with us, we will not be afraid. Zipporah and her family have put their trust in God our Shepherd and God has blessed her with a church family that cares for her and her children, the medication she needs to live, a job in a hospital, and the opportunity to put her children through school.

It occurred to me that if a woman who has lost her husband to AIDS and is herself HIV positive and has been excluded from her community can still put away fear for the future and put her trust in God, then certainly all of us who face much less severe challenges, can put our trust in God and banish fear from our lives as well.

Perhaps we should all put a little sign by our door or on our desk which says: DON'T BE AFRAID, TRUST IN GOD to remind us that no matter how difficult a situation we might face, when we turn our backs on fear and turn our faces toward God, God will care for us in ways we could never have imagined.

You see, the reason we can face challenges like this successfully, is that we do not face them alone. Just as a shepherd is always with his flock, so God is always with us so together we can face our challenges successfully.

The angel says: DON'T BE AFRAID and Mary responds: HERE I AM. LET IT BE TO BE ACCORDING TO YOUR WORD.

A couple of years ago a woman in our congregation lost her job as a highly trained professional person. There seemed to be no other jobs available in her field so she took whatever job as a salesclerk that she could find. Frequently, she would come up to me after worship and we would pray that God would give her patience and faith as she waited for a job that would use her professional training, skills and abilities.

I am delighted to say that a few weeks ago, she came up to me beaming and smiling because a professional position had opened up which was a perfect fit for her training and abilities and she is delighted with this new opportunity to use her gifts in the service of others.

We offered a prayer of thanksgiving for her patience and faithfulness in waiting such a long time and for God's faithfulness in opening a new door of opportunity for her.

God is faithful to us in God's own time and not on our timeline. That is why it is called faith because we are trusting in God to provide our deepest need in God's own time.

Recently, someone gave me this note card which reads:

A LITTLE FAITH WILL BRING YOUR SOUL TO HEAVEN
A GREAT FAITH WILL BRING HEAVEN TO YOUR SOUL.

My prayer is that all of us will develop a great faith and trust in God which will banish fear from our lives and bring God into our souls and lives right now.

In a few moments we will experience a service of communion with God. In that service we will remember the faith of Jesus who trusted himself completely into the hands of God.

Jesus must have experienced fear when the soldiers came to arrest him, when he was beaten and forced to carry his cross to Calvary and when he was nailed to that cross. But his trust in God overcame his fear as he said from the cross, "FATHER, INTO THY HANDS I COMMIT MY SPIRIT," which is an ultimate statement of faith.

At the beginning of his life here on earth, Mary the mother of Jesus said these words of faith and surrender: HERE I AM, LORD, LET IT BE WITH ME ACCORDING TO YOUR WORD.

Then at the end of his life on earth, Jesus said similar words of faith and surrender: FATHER INTO THY HANDS I COMMIT MY SPIRIT.

Mary and her son Jesus teach us the same thing. Faith is surrendering ourselves into the loving hands of God and when we trust God completely with our lives, fear disappears.

This morning when we receive communion, let us remember the words of faith and surrender that Mary and Jesus prayed as we surrender ourselves and our fears and our lives into the loving hands of God. This morning I encourage us to let go of that mountain of fear that sometimes dwells in us and let God replace it with a mountain of faith.

Please join us in singing *I'VE GOT FAITH LIKE A MOUNTAIN* and as we sing it imagine your faith expanding like a huge mountain of trust in your soul.