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Matthew 10:24-39

Ascension Lutheran Church
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Reflection: Do Not Fear

I don't know about the rest of you, but throughout our time of isolation due to the pandemic – in the midst of becoming a homeschool kindergarten, junior and high school teacher, finishing up seminary, running virtual youth group with students, and preparing to move – I somehow managed to find just enough time to catch up on some of my favorite shows. In particular I have this affinity for novelist Tom Clancy's fictional character, Jack Ryan and all his clandestine, CIA, anti-terror, save the world from danger missions.

While binge watching the last two seasons of the Jack Ryan series, it made me think back to an earlier movie that I loved called "The Sum of All Fears." For those of you not necessarily Jack Ryan fans, this movie highlights the fear of international hostility, and allows super-agent Jack Ryan to save the day once again. The more I reflected on the movie title, the more it hit me how it seems to speak to a very timely topic these days: fear.

Although in many parts of the world life is beginning to slowly return, at least for the time being, to some kind of normalcy and familiarity, however, many of us are still fearful of the current and future state of our world. Will our children be able to go back to school in-person in the fall, will we still have to wear masks whenever we leave the house for fear of getting sick, will we only be able to connect with family and friends through voice or video communications, will the diversity of the world continue to be a source of divide rather than celebrated? Anyone who has been even remotely connected to what's been happening in the world over the last three to four months knows all too well the underlying tension present in today's world.

Theologian and social activist, Thomas Merton, once said that, "At the root of all war is fear – not so much the fear we have of one another but the fear we have of everything." Fear can unnecessarily paralyze us, or it can quickly send us on the defensive. Think back to our national reaction to the events of 9/11. We put up our guard against all sorts of ridiculous things. We irrationally thought that if we avoided tall buildings and airplanes, that we would be safer. We reported unusual activity of people who didn't look like us when we saw them do anything that seemed to make us feel uncomfortable.

Fear is a powerful motivating factor. It can render people unmovable. It can lead them to do irrational things. Fear can control our every thought and our every action – even as we try to live a faithful life. There are so many types of fear that grip us today: fear of offending, fear of misunderstanding, fear of being judged, fear of being seen as "other," fear of losing our jobs, fear of our personal safety, fear of health concerns for ourselves or our families, fear of academic failure, fear of harassment, fear of looking foolish, fear of not being loved, fear of not fitting in, fear of being unprepared for whatever struggles lie ahead – fear of being alone. And there are just as many places that we experience fear these days – at home, on the job, in the store – I'm sorry to say this my friends, but fear is all around us, and the sum of all fears is overwhelming.

In today's gospel lesson, Jesus makes a simple, but timely point to his disciples: "No matter what happens, do not be afraid." He gets to the point by using multiple examples of scary things that could threaten the disciples, and he talks about confrontations he's faced and reminds them that they aren't going to escape without being impacted either.

But I'm not talking about a fear of losing our lives. Jesus' disciples – they obviously had a legitimate fear of this happening. It wasn't at all uncommon that those embracing faith in Jesus would be dragged out of town, beaten, stoned and left for dead. And there are some across the world today who continue to live under the same threats. Those threats aren't nearly as relevant for us in the relatively safe and free environment of America. Nevertheless, there are still fears that grip us and stop us short of living out our Christian faith and our commitments to live for Christ.

We fear the crowds. Here in the gospel of Matthew we see several examples of such fear with the Pharisees, the chief priest, and elders of the people. It's clear that they want to arrest Jesus, but they fail to take action because "they're were afraid of the crowds." We might say, "Good, they were on the wrong side anyway," but the truth is

that even we who cling to the truth of God's Word, and the assurances and promises of God, and know that we are His beloved children – we still surrender to public pressure. We waffle on issues like gender discrimination and sexual abuse. We close our eyes to the spiraling problem of racism in our nation. We talk privately about the growing immorality on TV and our movie screens, but then pay good money so that we can see it like everyone else. We fear the crowds.

Some of us fear for our relationships with our children as well. Our kids are growing up with these same pressures, and sometimes we're afraid to say enough is enough. We don't want to be seen by them as too oppressive or out of touch, and as a result we miss an opportunity to teach them that such values are of importance to our Christian walk and that the world does not need to have such a sway on their thinking. We fear that we'll lose their love if we do this, but in reality, we end up losing their respect.

We fear our ability to be providers too. Financially it's an incredibly difficult time for so many. Some of you are facing or have already experienced layoffs. And others, though okay yourselves, are watching friends and loved one's struggle in the wake of economic uncertainty.

There is so much potential around us, and so many opportunities to reach out in Christ's love, to share the life changing Word of God; but we're afraid to act. We're fearful of stepping up to the plate, fearful that we'll be wasting our time, or even worse that we'll fail.

Let's face it, fear overwhelms us – but here in our Scriptures, Jesus assures us that we do not need to be afraid. Jesus bids us not to be afraid – not afraid because nothing happens apart from our God knowing. Which might provoke an immediate response like, "What do you mean, 'Don't be afraid. That only adds to my concern. He knows what we're going through, but seemingly does nothing. Worse yet, he knows all the things I've covered up in my life, and maybe that explains why this is happening now. Proverbs 28 says, "What sins you cover, God will uncover," and even Jesus seems to imply in today text that, "There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed." It seems to me that there is much of which to be afraid."

And the concern is natural – except for the truth of who He would make us to be. The Proverb does read, "What sins you cover, God will uncover," but it also goes on to say that "What sins you are willing to uncover God will cover." He would offer us this day to admit our fears, to acknowledge how they've controlled our actions at times for the worse, how they've eroded our trust in Him. He would offer us today to confess, yet not to expose us, but to make us whole; not to imprison us, but to make us free; not to sicken us in grief and further worry, but to set us free.

He would set us free from the sin and the guilt and the worry because He is our loving Father and He desires to see us as His children, members of His household, His most important possession in all the world. The examples of the sparrow and the hairs on our heads are powerful. In comparison to most matters, sparrows are insignificant. Jesus says, "Two for a penny." The world's scales won't be tipped by their loss. But that's not God's thinking. We're told that He cares for all his creatures and not a one falls to the ground without the Father's notice.

The same goes for our hairs. Every day we lose hairs in a comb or a brush. Some of us lose them a bit more easily than others. No one stops to count them, and most of the time we don't even notice them until we clean out our brush or wipe out the shower or tub. Yet every one of them has a number in the heart of God.

If God takes notice of all these little things, how much more does he take notice of all that is happening with you? How much more does God care about your well-being? Your physical, mental, emotional, and relational well-being. So, "Do not be afraid," because you are worth immeasurably more – so much more that God in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit has done the most amazing thing with a miserable cross and an empty tomb to rescue me and you.

Life as a follower of Christ in this world is not an easy one. It wasn't easy for Jesus, and we can expect the same as one of His disciples. But in the same manner, we're also reminded of the important and comforting truth that we're not going anywhere that the master hasn't gone before – where He hasn't already cleared the way. He's faced the challenges. He knows the struggles. He knows what it's like to be in want, to lose everything you own, your family, your friends, your livelihood and even your very life in this world. He's been there.

We have the joyous and certain hope that our Savior lives – He who is able to sympathize with our struggles, with our fears, having faced them himself. He's gone before and cleared the way, victoriously facing and overcoming the same that he might bestow upon us forgiving mercy, but also pouring out His new life-giving grace in the Spirit and strengthen us with new resolve to live for him again.

Dear sisters and brothers, we know who will rule in the end – the victory already secured on the cross and guaranteed with an empty tomb. We know that the Word that is whispered out of fear in many places today will triumph and be proclaimed in confidence to all the ends of the earth. We know that it is the one true hope and life-giving message we have to share with everyone in whom we encounter. We know that it is the one provision and protection that we can give to our loved ones that no one can steal away. For life in this world will be lost, one way or another; but nothing can take the eternal life that is already ours through faith in Christ Jesus. And this, my friends, is the very best reason of all not to fear. Thanks be to God. Amen!