

July 5, 2020

[Series] "Fear Not: Finding Courage in an Anxious World"

[Sermon] "Fear Not: God Will Save You"

[Psalm 91](#)

Julian of Norwich lived in England from 1342-1416. It was a time of crisis like no other. Julian was alive for a good chunk of The Hundred Years War between England and France. She was born just prior to the Bubonic Plague that killed at least 1/3 of Europe's population. (An estimated total of 50 million people died in Europe, Asia and Africa combined.) During her lifetime The Church was also ravaged by compromised leaders who were co-opted by royalty and others in power. During much of her life, Julian chose to live in a room attached to a church (St. Julian's) in Norwich, where she committed her life to solitude, stillness, and prayer. It was in this setting that she had 'visions' of God's love (they've been called "showings"); sixteen different ones. She reflected on these for almost 20 years and THEN put her experiences in writing (which were translated but remained relatively obscure until 1901). One of her most famous conclusions – while surrounded by both tragedy AND the love of God – is that "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well."

"All shall be well . . . and all manner of things shall be well." Really?

But Julian . . . Have you seen the unemployment rate? Have you seen the recent spike in positive COVID cases? Did you see the riots? Have you been watching the political landscape? Do you have any idea what I'm facing personally? How isolated I've been? How uncertain I am? How addicted I am? How depressed I am? How disappointing the last few months have been with cancelled graduations, weddings, and 'trips of a lifetime?' Funerals that have to be postponed or done remotely? Do you know how confused I am about where I stand in relationship to our country's racial history and reality? "All shall be well?" I'm afraid this is NOT the case right now; I'm afraid that it will never be again. Tom . . . I'm afraid what you just read in Psalm 91 isn't true; at least not for now . . . not for me . . . not for us . . . not for our country or world.

The Psalmist writes, "You will not fear . . ." a whole bunch of things: night terrors, enemy arrows, pestilence and plague, harm, disaster, lions and snakes (Can I get an "Amen," John Howard?). Who is he talking about? Who is he making this declarative statement to?

"Those who dwell in the shelter of the Most High and rest in the shadow of the Almighty . . . [those for whom God is a] refuge and fortress . . . [those who God] covers with His feathers and [tucks] under His wings . . . [those for whom God is a] shield and rampart." (Psalm 91:1-4)

Before making all these audacious promises that "All shall be well and . . . all manner of things shall be well" the Psalmist describes a life of faith lived close to God; a life of trust and rest and relinquishment into the tough and tender hands of the Living God. There is a presupposition that

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God is our strength, our protector, our only hope. And if that's true about us, the Psalmist says, "We will not fear." (Psalm 91:5)

When fear comes, and it will, ask yourself two questions: 1) What am I afraid of? Name it if you can and don't be afraid to go below the more obvious fear to a deeper one that is waiting to be discovered. 2) Am I tucked under God's wing; close enough to be in His strong shadow?

If we're not – if we're unprotected and exposed and out there on our own – we SHOULD be afraid. How does anyone navigate all that can, does and will go wrong on their own?

But if we ARE under God's protection; if we are close to Him – close enough for Him to hold us and whisper into our ear that "All shall be well and all manner of things shall be well" – then we have no need to be afraid. Fear need not be prevalent and persistent.

Some people are more naturally anxious or confident than others, but everyone is susceptible to fear. Sometimes fear sneaks up on us; sometimes it feels overwhelming. Sometimes we're in denial of the fear that grips us; that's a whole different sermon. And sometimes – when we try to go it alone without God's OVERWHELMING, STRONG LOVING PRESENCE – the fear inside feels like it will never go away. The Psalmist says over and over again – as does all of scripture from Genesis to Revelation – that those who "trust in the Lord" need not be afraid.

"Fearing not" is NOT Indifference. To not care or pay attention to reality is not a virtue. Scripture does not tell us to insulate ourselves from that which leads to fear by distracting/entertaining/numbing ourselves from what is really happening around us. Apathy is tempting. Isolation is tempting. But Julian of Norwich didn't cloister herself out of apathy or a desire to hide from what was going on around her. She withdrew to that room of the sanctuary in Norwich to do as the Apostle Paul instructed: to "put on the full armor of God and stand against the devil's schemes;" to pray against the "principalities and powers." (Ephesians 6:11-12) Paul tells us our enemy is working to grow fear and diminish faith in us.

"Fearing not" is also NOT some sort of Prosperity Gospel. I know the Psalmist says, "If you make the Most High your dwelling . . . then no harm will befall you, no disaster will come near your tent." (Psalm 91:9-10) But he can't mean it literally in every situation, for all of time. There's too much biblical evidence – and life experience – for that to be exactly what he meant. I know this, not just because of my experience, but because of the very word of God – the very words of God at the end of Psalm 91. Here in verses 14-16, the Psalmist isn't imparting his own words of encouragement but speaking directly the words of the Lord; it's a "Thus says the Lord." And one of the things the Lord declares is "I will be with [you] IN trouble, and deliver you [from it]." (Psalm 91:15)

There is always a temptation to think that Christians will never face harm; especially if we're being faithful. That's why you've probably heard from someone that if you really believe, you will be healed. That's why you see and hear all sorts of ridiculous claims from The Church.

That's why you've seen the pictures of people putting elastic on small New Testament Bibles and strapping them over their mouth and nose to keep the Coronavirus at bay. But doesn't the Bible (doesn't Psalm 91) say that "God will command His angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone." (Psalm 91:11-12) Or get a disease, or get in an accident, etc. Do you recognize this verse? Are you familiar with who quoted it in the New Testament? It was the devil (Matthew/Luke 4) – tempting Jesus with this very passage in the wilderness, just after Jesus was baptized and before He began His public ministry.

In essence, the devil was saying, "Hey Jesus, there's a way to save the world without suffering or a Cross. There's a way to do this without any harm *befalling* You. It's right here in the Bible you love so much." [Jesus responds back with another scripture from Deuteronomy about "not putting the Lord to the test . . ."] And the devil whispers the same thing to us: 'God promises that bad things, hard things, disappointing things will never happen to you. If bad things are happening to you that means God isn't with you, isn't near you, isn't listening to you or protecting you anymore. So be afraid. Be very afraid!'

Verse 16 does promise "long life." And that might be generally true – that walking with God and tucking into His grace and truth most often leads to a long, robust, healthy and whole life. But there are car accidents, and cancer, and catastrophes that strike Christians too . . . and there's this little annoying part of our story called the Crucifixion. Jesus was as close to the Father as one could get; and yet He died far too soon and in far too painful of a way.

Quoting and praying Psalm 91 isn't going to make bad stuff, including the Coronavirus, go away magically. But with God at work and by our side we will never be alone and, therefore, never need to be afraid. He will help us IN times of trouble. He will be our "fortress and shield" no matter what we face; AND be our strength to help others in their troubles. And He will put His arms around us – and anyone else who is alone and afraid. He will protect us when we face trials and challenges and pandemics of any kind.

And this includes the pandemic of racism. We have, once again, been reminded that this disease (this plague) has not been cured. It keeps rearing its ugly head. We have seen "spikes" and are realizing, more clearly, that we cannot be INDIFFERENT to it – and those affected by it – anymore. Some people, George Floyd and others – are not "being satisfied with the long life" (Psalm 91:16) God promises directly at the end of Psalm 91.

We should **NOT BE AFRAID**: of listening and learning, of saying the wrong thing or asking awkward questions, of looking below the surface and finding out that we need to repent and ask for forgiveness, of discovering that saying "I'm not a racist" isn't enough.

Racism is a disease that still needs a cure. And a cure requires a diagnosis . . . and an immunization which can be given early in life. If adults are not willing to deal with this

particular disease we'll just keep passing it on to our kids. We may be asymptomatic for the most part (no overt signs that anyone can see), but we can still be carriers and pass it on.

When it comes to cancer, dementia/Alzheimer's . . . people are working around the clock to find cures. What about a cure for racism?

It starts with acknowledging our part, our attitudes, our indifference . . . and our FEARS. It involves changing patterns and thoughts – and learning where these thoughts and patterns even come from in the first place; and how deep they run.

Actually, the cure for racism – and all sin – starts with God and His Kingdom. A Kingdom in which everyone is created "in the image of God" and invited to the table. A Kingdom in which everyone feels safe and loved and sheltered in the "shadow of the Almighty;" set apart as sons and daughters of the Most High God. It starts with the Father of all, who has declared through His Son and in the power of His Holy Spirit that "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well."

God has made and is making "all things well" in and through His One and Only Son: who resisted the temptation of the devil to use scripture in a way that went against God's will; who reached out to everyone – insiders and outsiders, lepers and Samaritans, tax collectors and sinners. Jesus didn't "strike His foot against a stone" but instead had a nail struck by a hammer and driven through His foot into the cross. He refused to come down from the cross when they bated Him at the very end. And – although this is hard to explain – He left the shelter and shadow of His Father and "descended to Hell" in faith that His Father would keep His promises. And the Father did!

"Because he loves Me," thus says the Lord, "I will rescue him; I will protect him for he acknowledges My name. He will call upon Me and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honor him." (Psalm 91:14-15)

It is in Jesus Christ that we see the truth of Psalm 91 and it is because of Jesus Christ that we do not have to fear.