



[Listen to \*How Firm a Foundation\*, First-Plymouth Church, Lincoln, NE](#)

Greetings!

Please read [Isaiah 43: 1-5](#)

*How Firm a Foundation* is one of my favorite hymns, not just for the spunky tune, but for the deeply meaningful words. The second verse announces "*Fear not, I am with thee, O be not dismayed, for I am thy God and will still give thee aid*"

I have been thinking a lot about fear. There is a lot of fear talk. I remember studying great speeches in a class in college. We looked at Franklin D. Roosevelt's first inaugural address (he is the only US President with 4 of them) where in the depths of the Great Depression, he said, "the only thing we have to fear is... fear itself."

I am not talking about the healthy and normal side of fear that keeps us safe or that is part of our natural reflexes that help us survive and even thrive. No, I am talking about the kind of fear that separates us and even keeps us from engaging in life with its relationships, opportunities and possibilities.

In the Bible, it is widely shared that the construct *Do Not Be Afraid* is mentioned 365 times! While this would make a great devotional book, I want us to consider what is behind these admonitions, choosing faith over fear.

Fear sells! Consider this partial list of attributes, factors, concepts and social groups that are used to create fear: strangers, vaccines, opinions, politics, skin color, language, foods, emotions, sexual orientation, sexual exploitation, immigration, war, peace, equality, equity, disabilities, social media, mass media, diversity, racism, individuality, group think, privilege, religion, gender, class, age.

In 2016 Bishop Will Willimon published a book entitled [Fear of the Other: No Fear in Love](#). This great little book talks about the great social divides in our culture. In the introduction to the book, Willimon writes, "*My job is not to worry about opinion polls,*

*or what nine out of ten can swallow without choking. My peculiar vocation is to help the church to think like Christians so that we might be given the grace to act like Jesus."*

God is the creator of all this difference. The Bible teaches us this important understanding. And acknowledging this is what Bishop Willimon is talking about when he says, *have the grace to act like Jesus*. Think of all the difference Jesus engaged in during his life and ministry and yet he was not afraid.

What if difference is not to be feared but to be embraced? We have talked before about how multicultural the church was at its beginning and how over time it moved from embracing difference. Fear of the other led the church to racism, sexism, and nationalism, along with sectarian practices in theology and ecclesiology. Fear is a powerful force indeed!

How our world would look different if we were people of faith instead of people of fear of the other! What if we could love more than just those who look and think like us? *"Perfect Love casts out all fear"* - the notion being that love at its perfection has no place for fear. Are you a fearful or faithful person when it comes to the other?

We are constantly bombarded with messaging that moves us towards separation, residential enclaves of ideas, values, norms, political beliefs and theologies. While differences could be embraced and celebrated with a sense of curiosity and joy, instead the "the other" is often maligned.

Fear can exist in relationships. But fear cannot exist in healthy relationships. Unhealthy relationships, both personal and corporate, may cause fear and for some, to lose faith or worse, think that fear is real faith. This is a real danger. Israel nearly destroyed its relationship with God in its waywardness, becoming self-centered and the opposite of love itself. Israel struggled with fear of the other within its own culture. We must watch ourselves that we do not do the same in the church, rather, we must always search for the grace to act like Jesus. However, at times we can allow the institution to become the substitute for the "Holy in our Midst" by thinking that the institution is the holy, but it is not. The institution of the church points towards the Holy and nothing more.

The passage cited from Isaiah holds some meaning for us today; it is a word about the reversal of life from one of fear and judgement to protection and abundance. A life of sin and judgement to a life of forgetting the past and stepping into the new. Duke Divinity School Professor Anatheia Portier-Young suggests that, *"...Isaiah moves from a panoramic view of God's universal providence to focus on the radical particularity of God's love for Israel."*<sup>1</sup>

In the ancient world of Isaiah, in this ugly "gottcha" world where we live in retribution of each other instead of the restoration of each other – we make a choice. We choose fear. Fear separates. Restoration proclaims something new. Instead of a chasm of separation caused by fear, a bridge spans between the two creating a new relationship. This is what God proclaims in this passage from Isaiah. The old relationship is destroyed but in restoration a new relationship is created. For we

worship the one who declares, I make "all things new."<sup>2</sup>

### Benediction<sup>3</sup>

Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you.  
I have called you by name—you are mine!

When you go through deep waters and great trouble,  
I will be with you.

When you go through rivers of difficulty,  
you will not drown!

When you walk through the fire of oppression,  
you will not be burned up;  
the flames will not consume you.

For I am the Lord, your God,  
the Holy One of Israel.  
Do not be afraid, for I am with you.

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<sup>1</sup>[Commentary on Isaiah 43:1-7](#)

<sup>2</sup>[Revelation 21:5](#)

<sup>3</sup>[Blessing, Isaiah 43:1-5](#)

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Peace,



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