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I John
“Perfect Love Casts Out Fear”
I John 4:13-21

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I’m the kind of person who loves a scary movie. I love the rush of adrenaline I get after I get scared. It’s so much fun when something spooky pops out from around the corner. But the thing I like most about scary movies is that once the movie is over, I can get up out of my chair and walk out of the theater without fear. I can leave that fear behind.

But there are fears that I can’t escape so easily, and maybe you feel them too. Not the loud crash of a scary movie kind of fear, but the low hum of everyday fears. Fears that are always lingering in the background of my life. Fears of inadequacy. Fears of disappointing the ones I look up to. Fears that I’m going to mess up my future by one mistake. Or worse yet, that I’ll do something to mess up someone else – my children, my family, my friends. Fears that I’ll do something or say something that penetrates the heart of another person in a way that causes them harm. That I’ll hurt someone by my actions or by my words and will become, despite my best intentions, an object of fear in their lives. These are the kinds of fears that keep us awake at night as we replay all our mistakes at 3 o’clock in the morning.

But even those fears are not the existential type. They’re not the kind that John is referring to in our passage this morning. The fear that he’s talking about is that greatest of all fears - the one that the sum total of all the actions and all the mistakes and all the misplaced words that I ever spoke will one day be tallied up against all the good that I ever hoped to do in this life and together they will be weighed and measured and ultimately, I will be found wanting. And God, the righteous judge, will look down from his heavenly throne upon me with a great and terrible frown on his face as he metes out the punishment that my fearful heart believes I deserve.

Gary Burge, Presbyterian minister and professor of New Testament, did an informal survey of 40 students in an introductory course he was teaching. He asked them to write a one-page essay “analyzing whether their lives had been shaped by the threat of law or the wonder of God’s grace.” And the results were devastating. He says, “over 90 percent of the class admitted privately that the possibility of God’s disfavor and wrath had shaped their Christian outlook since childhood.” Over the course of their lives, they had somehow absorbed the idea that Christianity was all about following the rules, and that God was full of anger. One student wrote this:

“I feel like God punishes me for sins all of the time. I feel that there is always something I am being punished for. I know that is impossible because there are not enough minutes in the day for God to punish us. I probably should not call it punishment, but that is the way I feel about God’s justice. I know of God’s love and blessings for me and for that I am

eternally grateful and thankful. But I live with this fear that one mess-up and I will be punished again.”^a

“I live with this fear.” Fear of punishment. Fear of God’s wrath. Fear of getting what I believe I deserve. It’s a very human way to live, isn’t it? We know exactly what she means, don’t we? We know what it’s like to live in fear.

There’s a story from the Old Testament that you’ll remember. It’s the story of Joseph and his brothers. And you’ll recall that Joseph was an annoying young man, so his brothers decided one day to get rid of him. They sold him into slavery and he eventually made his way to Egypt. And years passed and Joseph went from rags to riches because of the grace and favor of the Lord. Joseph became Pharaoh’s right-hand man, so when a great famine came into the land, it was Joseph’s job to collect and administer the grain to all the people. And when Jacob, Joseph’s father, heard that there was food in Egypt, he sent his sons, Joseph’s brothers, into Egypt to go and get some.

And a great drama ensues because Joseph recognizes his brothers but his brothers don’t recognize him. Joseph sends them back and forth from Egypt to their father until finally, in a climactic moment, Joseph reveals himself to his brothers and he forgives them and he weeps and he kisses them. But they’re still afraid. And years pass after their reconciliation, and Jacob, their father, reaches a good old age and he dies. And the text says that, “When Joseph’s brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, ‘It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him.’ So they sent a message to Joseph, - they fabricated a story and sent it to their brother - saying, ‘Your father gave this command before he died: ‘Say to Joseph, ‘Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.’”^b The brothers were living in fear. Fear of Joseph. But really it was fear of the punishment that they thought they deserved.

Or consider another story from Scripture you heard about last week. Bill preached about shame, and fear is, of course, closely tied to shame. And in his sermon, Bill painted a beautiful picture of the parable of the prodigal son. The son who squandered half of his father’s wealth in a foreign land and resigned himself to go home and beg for his father’s mercy. And when the father catches sight of his long-lost son, he begins to run. One detail you’ll recall from Bill’s sermon is how strange it was in that place and time for a man to run as the father did. Which made me wonder when I heard that what must it have been like for the prodigal son to see his father sprinting down the road? To see such a sight must’ve been terrifying! “Is that my Dad running toward me? After all I’ve done - This can only mean one thing! He’s going to kill me!”

But, of course, that’s not at all what he found when his father greeted him. He was instead bowled over by a love so great that it defies understanding. John tells us in our passage for this morning that perfect love casts out fear. The prodigal son was greeted by that very love which casts out all his fears.

I was out getting lunch on Friday and standing in front of me in line at the counter was a woman with a t-shirt that said “Faith over Fear” written in big bold letters on the back. And I thought, that’s great. I’ve prayed those words many times. Lord, give me faith to overcome my

^a Gary Burge – NIV Application Commentary – Letters of John

^b Genesis 50:15-17

fears. But the more I thought about it, the more John's words started to interject. If my faith is the thing that will drive out my fears, then I've got a problem. Because my faith is far too small, and my fears are far too big. I need to be invited into something bigger than myself to drive away my fears. I can't do it on my own, I need someone stronger to come along. Someone whose "Perfect love casts out fear." Eugene Peterson tells a beautiful story toward the end of one of his books^c. He says,

"When I was five years old I would walk across the meadow between our backyard and his fenced fields. I would stand at the barbed wire strand and watch the farmer plow the field with his enormous tractor. The thing I wished for most in those days was to get a ride on that John Deere tractor. One summer day I was standing at the fence ... watching Brother Storm, for that was the farmer's name, plow the field. He was probably a hundred yards away when he spotted me. He stopped the tractor, stood up from the seat and made strong waving motions to me with his arm. I had never seen anyone use gestures like that. He looked mean and angry; he was large and ominous in his bib overalls and straw hat. He was yelling at me, but the wind was blowing against him, and I could hear nothing. I knew that I was probably where I shouldn't be. Five-year-old boys often are. I turned away and left. Sadly, I hadn't felt I was doing anything wrong – I was only watching him from what I thought was a safe distance and wishing that someday, somehow, I could get to ride that tractor. I went home feeling rejected, rebuked..."

The Sunday after my disappointment at the edge of his field, Brother Storm called me over after worship and said, 'Little Pete' ... 'why didn't you come out in the field Thursday and ride the tractor with me?' I told him that I didn't know I could have, that I thought he was chasing me away. He said, 'I called you to come. I waved for you to come. Why did you leave?' I said that I didn't know that was what he was doing. He said, 'What do you do when you want to get somebody to come to you? I showed him, extending my index finger and curling it back toward me three or four times.

He harrumphed, 'That's piddling, Little Pete. On the farm we do things big..."

A few days after my disappointment at the edge of his field and his reprimand in church, I was back at the fence, watching, hoping I might get a second chance. The giant Norwegian saw me, stopped the tractor, and did it again, made that sweeping motion of invitation. I was through the barbed wire in a flash, running across the furrowed field and then up on the big green John Deere. He let me stand in front of him, holding the steering wheel, pulling the plow down that long stretch of field, my smallness now absorbed into his largeness."

Perfect love casts out fear. Beloved, we do not need to be afraid, because the one who loves us is bigger than all our fears.

The father in the parable says, "let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found."^d Joseph says to his brothers, "do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones... you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good." Jesus says

^c Eugene Peterson – Under the Unpredictable Plant

^d Luke 15: 23-24

to his disciples, “fear not, little flock; for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”^e

John says to us, “God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world.” The antidote to fear is not white-knuckle faith. It’s love! God has loved us. He has made us as Christ is in this world. He has taken away everything from us that would cause us to fear and replaced it with a love that is bigger than we can possibly imagine. Scripture says, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” And so, we think it is right to be afraid of God. To fear what he might do to us if we mess up even just the tiniest little bit. But that’s not what Scripture means. To fear the Lord means to stand in awe of his greatness. And the greatest thing about our God is his love which we see in Jesus. One preacher says,

“The love of Jesus went all the way. It did not hold back. It was not remotely touched by fear, not by fear of what would happen to him or fear of what would happen to those he loved. He wasn’t afraid of what people might do or say. He wasn’t afraid of what he might find out. He wasn’t afraid of what that love might or might not produce in its object... the great engine of Christian love – its starting point – is prior belovedness: belovedness at the point of failure and shame and guilt. It’s the kind of love that sacrifices itself, not because it has to, but because it wants to.”^f

God loves us. Beloved, we do not need to be afraid. For while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. In Christ, God swallows up all of our fears so that all that’s left in our hearts is love. Thanks be to God.

^e Luke 12:32

^f David Zahl – The Cheap Perfume Route