

MORAL DILEMMA

Isaiah 7:4 - ***“TELL HIM TO STOP WORRYING.”***

This is Isaiah speaking to the same King Ahaz we talked about last weekend. Before he made the foolish alliance with the Assyrians, Isaiah warned him it was bound to fail and encouraged him to put his faith and trust in God.

Isaiah 7:1-9

We exist in a culture of us vs. them, and each side feels like they are losing. There's a battle and all around us the enemy is taking ground.

News networks need an extreme – and it happens on all networks because fear and panic produce profits. Networks need a crisis du jour.

Where the Bible would tell us – *“Tell him to stop worrying. Tell her she doesn't need to fear.”*
The news tells us – *“Start worrying. Here is something you should fear.”*

Fear energizes.

The science attests to this.

The fear response lights up the amygdala. And as it is with many of the strong emotions that fire up our brain, there's a chemical release of dopamine and serotonin when we feel fear. So when we fear, we get a dopamine reward in our brain. It sounds absurd, but in a way ***fear feels good.***

The result is that – if we aren't mindful as we consume our news - ***“staying informed”*** can become synonymous with ***“staying panicked.”***

GARBAGE IN GARBAGE OUT

Faulty data produces faulty results. Wrong numbers produce wrong answers.

Some of us have an input problem. What are we feeding ourselves?

“Staying in the know” – if it isn't balanced with God's truth – produces unstable Christians.

We need to heed again and again the words in Isaiah 7:4

“Tell him to stop worrying. Tell him he doesn't need to fear”

WORRY VS ANXIETY

Worry is a noun. But it's also a verb. Something you do actively. Anxiety is a noun. It's a feeling. We will feel all kinds of feelings in life... and to feel them isn't wrong.

Neither is feeling anxiety.

1 Peter 5:7 says - *Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.*

But this doesn't mean anxiety is always a matter of an on or off switch.

So often we act like faith is supposed to turn off anxiety like flipping a switch.

To treat it like it comes with an off switch can sow shame in those that suffer from it clinically. For some anxiety is a domineering, bordering on permanent fixture. Clinical anxiety is a matter of the brain. PTSD is a matter of the brain. And so on. We don't say to health issues like cancer – “pray it away.” Yet in the past that's been the answer to anxiety.

Talking about worry as synonymous with clinical anxiety can sow seeds of guilt and shame. This isn't that.

When I use the word worry tonight – know that I'm speaking about day to day, general worry and anxiety... what God is speaking to specifically in this passage through the prophet Isaiah.

But there's a second necessary point of clarification:

WORRY vs CONCERN

God doesn't say through Isaiah “**tell him not to concern himself.**” He says “**don't worry.**”

Isaiah 7 says that Ahaz was trembling with fear, “like trees shaking in a storm.” Why? A storm was brewing. We don't know full details, but Syria and Judah were attacking Judah and looking to replace Ahaz on the throne with the son of someone named Tabeel. There was legitimate reason for concern. There was plenty to be concerned about.

There are plenty of things in my life that will concern me. And this concern and care can be good for me and those around me when it sparks action. I'd tell you concern is a good thing when it's

- 1.) Directed at the right things.
- 2.) Kept from extremes.
- 3.) And causes us to act.

God's people are instructed in scripture to do justice, love our neighbor, and work for the good of where God has placed us. This political season is frustrating at times and often concerning, but that concern can be a good thing when it's directed at the right things, kept from extremes, and causes us to act. And acting politically as we've said again and again is what helps us do justice and love our neighbor both practically and systemically.

Proverbs 29:7 says:

The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern.

This verse states a lack of concern can be plain wicked. Concern should fuel our compassion and our loving others well. Concern should fuel our convictions and where we take our stand politically.

The passage we read to open ended with the words:

“If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.”

Trust in God isn't a passive endeavor, it involves walking in faith and taking a stand based on our convictions that are built on the truth of God's Word.

I share all this because the political sphere loves to take our legitimate concerns and stir marry them to fears and worries.

But our faith means we tie our legitimate concerns first and foremost to who God is...

AND peace flows from that that drowns our fears.

May we soak in **Psalm 47:8** that says

“God reigns above the nations, sitting on his holy throne.”

This is a pivotal truth that drives away worry.

But it is sometimes used as an escapist shrug of the shoulders that says – I'm not going to worry about that or show concern...

“God is on the throne” should spark praise in any and every season.

But “God is on the throne” should spark passivity in no season.

Now that we've had those two points of clarification... Let's look at the two conclusions of the matter in Isaiah and this episode with King Ahaz... One involves a sign. The other a fear.

A PROMISED SIGN

God wanted Ahaz's trust and asks Ahaz to request a sign.

Ahaz refuses under a mask of piety.

A virgin will conceive a child, and she will give birth to a son and name him Immanuel, which means “God with us.”

The first significance was for King Ahaz – he didn't need to seek help from Judah's enemy because God was with them.

In the same way – we are freed from fear when we recognize God is near.

See, God is not some force. He's a person. And in this personhood He wants to be present with us. We see it in the OT with places like the Garden of Eden and the tabernacle, and we see it in the lives of the Bible's characters again and again.

And it's not just some metaphor. Jesus took on flesh. Born of a virgin. Immanuel, God with us. If the Holy Spirit is at home in us, this means while we will feel feelings of fear and worry, those feelings don't make a home in us because the Spirit of God lives there.

When World War 1 ended the Treaty of Versailles was so punitive and punishing that the market crashed, some 6 million people lost their jobs, and there was a rising extremism. It put Germany in such a desperate position it became fertile ground for appeals to fear and the rise of the Nazi party. In this setting Bonhoeffer preached the sermon – “Overcoming Fear” and he said the following:

*"Let's say there is a ship on the high sea, having a fierce struggle with the waves. The storm wind is blowing harder by the minute. The boat is small, tossed about like a toy; the sky is dark; the sailors' strength is failing. Then one of them is gripped by . . . whom? what? . . . he cannot tell himself. But someone is there in the boat who wasn't there before. . . . Suddenly he can no longer see or hear anything, can no longer row, a wave overwhelms him, and in final desperation he shrieks: Stranger in this boat, who are you? And the other answers, "I am Fear." All hope is lost, Fear is in the boat... **Fear is in the boat, in Germany, in our own lives and in the nave of this church—naked fear of an hour from now, of tomorrow and the day after.**"*

If we are honest there are traces of fear in the nave of this church today.
Relevant concerns for the future. Other concerns that American is going to repeat the past.

And we too need to remind people in our culture fueled by fear of who is with us in the boat - Jesus. The one whose words calm storms.

In Mark's Gospel account of the calming of the storm, it ends saying of the disciples: *"Now they were more afraid than ever and said to each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!"*

Fear of the winds and waves was eclipsed by a proper fear – the fear of God in flesh, Jesus Christ.

This speaks to the second conclusion of the Isaiah and King Ahaz episode:
A PROPER FEAR

King Ahaz's rejection of Isaiah's message is almost immediate. He chooses to place his trust in Assyria instead of Jehovah. His fear of Assyria's power is what sparks his alliance with them.

And that fear eclipses his appropriate fear of God.

Isaiah had prophesied the disaster this was going to be...
And all the while Syria and Israel were still problematic, along with the resurgent Assyria.
Everyone had a theory about what was going on as well as what should be done.

No doubt there were conspiracies. There were fears and theories of what could happen in each direction... If we go to the align with Syria and Israel they will come for our freedoms... If we align with Assyria they will come for our families. Fears and conspiracies thrown every direction

I love that God comes to Isaiah with specific instructions for him, applicable to the remnant who had faith in Him... I believe they are specific instructions for those that would be faithful to God in tumultuous times in any nation...

Isaiah 8:11-14 reads: *The Lord has given me a strong warning not to think like everyone else does. He said, "Don't call everything a conspiracy, like they do, and don't live in dread of what frightens them.*

*Make the Lord of Heaven's Armies holy in your life.
He is the one you should fear.
He is the one who should make you tremble.
He will keep you safe."*

Where Ahaz misplaced his fear,
we see his successor Hezekiah didn't make the same mistake.

Isaiah 7 mentions "***the aqueduct of the upper pool on the road to the washerman's field***" where Isaiah had stood outside the walls of Judah to prophesy from.

And this isn't the last time we see it in Isaiah.

In Isaiah 36:2, 34 years later, the commander of the Assyrian army comes to collect on the terrible agreement King Ahaz had made with Assyria. He orders Judah to surrender. And he stands at that aqueduct to sow worry and fear into the hearts of those on the walls of Judah.

Unlike King Ahaz, King Hezekiah doesn't succumb to anxiety and worry.

FIRST - They don't say a word back. Because, as it says in verse 21 – the king had commanded "don't answer him." Thoughts of fear may come, but we don't have to spark a conversation. Thoughts of worry may come, but we don't have to let it make a home.

But **SECONDLY** – Hezekiah tore his robes and went into the temple to pray, ordering others to do the same. Was Hezekiah feeling fear and worry? No doubt. And he takes it to God in prayer.

This prompts Isaiah to come and echo the words he spoke to Ahaz, words we hear hundreds of times in scripture in various forms: "***do not be afraid.***"

I keep thinking how the hope of Christmas is going to hit especially hard in 2020. COVID. This election. We're going to need the reminder of why we don't fear, but we hope in every season.

When fears drift from the November election into the holiday season, may we pivot from the voice of fear to the verses on faith in **Hebrews 11**. That there were people of faith who suffered losses in this life, but "*were longing for a better country- a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.*"

But in the meantime we cling to the same sign and promise that gets echoed at Christmas:
Immanuel – God is with us.

"O Come oh Come Immanuel"

Jesus has come. Jesus is coming again.

The short view will often spark fear, worry, and instability. But the long view is Christ has come, Christ is King, and he's coming again. And there's hope in that eternally.

*That having gone "with us" all the way to the tomb, he will take us "with him."
One day God with us graduates to us with God in Heaven.*

Revelation 21 speaks to this...

“Look, God’s home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever.”

What a hope we have in Jesus.

My hope is that the witness of this church and THE Church in this season isn’t that the sky is falling. But that one day the sky will open and Christ is coming again.

Not resulting in a people that is uncompassionate and unconcerned.
But one that is unshaken, continuing to run the race set before us...

On November 3rd, the race for the White House will be over.
Our race is only beginning.

There have been nearly 50 races for the White House. There have been hundreds of platforms.
Never has one crippled the church. And never has one crowned Christendom.

Should we be concerned about who sits in the oval office? Absolutely. Vote accordingly.
But we can’t let the lead up or the results fuel fear. Let those concerns fuel prayers.

On November 4th half of our nation is going to be shook and distraught.
But half of this church shouldn’t be.

Because we don’t hope in the victory in the party of the elephant or donkey.
But hope in the lion and the lamb, who is eternally on the throne.