

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon: Fear Not

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Scripture: 2 Timothy 1:7-9a

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So Holy Spirit, come and do what my words cannot do, but only your word can do and make us more like you and calm our anxious hearts, God, and make us brave. Pray this in your name, Jesus. Amen.

Well, hello BelPres. Thank you for letting us join you in your living room, or your kitchen, or wherever you are. We are bringing church to you. And we're going to keep doing this as long as we need to. It's great to be back. I was in Rwanda. It's great to be back.

Today, let's talk about fear. When I planned these services months ago, I actually planned to talk on a different topic, but fear seems a little more relevant given what we're going through, because all of us, all of us have had our lives upended and disrupted by COVID-19. That generates some anxiety, even if it's just a little bit of anxiety. It generates questions like, am I going to get sick? Is someone I love going to get sick? How's this going to affect my SATs? How's this going to affect my school, my job? What is this going to do to the economy? Are there going to be any restaurants left in Seattle when this is all over with? Lots of questions, lots of fear.

How do the people of God respond to a pandemic? Well, I can tell you how they do not respond. They do not move in fear. They do not let their fears and their anxieties overtake them. They do not let their thoughts, and actions, and decisions be governed by fear. Ever since January, we've been talking about what does it mean to be an all-in follower of Jesus, and all-in followers of Jesus moving faith, not fear always.

There are over 400 places in the Bible where God says, "Do not be afraid. Fear not. I am with you." That means that we're wise. We take appropriate precautions, but we move in faith, not fear. Now notice I said move in faith, not fear. Move there is the operative word because we may feel fear. Feeling fear is normal. That's just normal. The issue is not what we feel. It's what are we moving in? What's driving our decisions? What's motivating our actions. We can feel fear but still move in faith.

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So many of you are doing this, BelPres. I'm hearing the stories. So many of you are moving in faith. This sermon is a way of saying, "Keep at it, man. Well done." Because when we do the opposite, when we do the opposite and move in fear not faith, we make some pretty dumb decisions. We all know about the panic buying that's happening. And that people are hoarding hand sanitizer, which that one makes sense. But also stores are out of toilet paper, which is just weird. Then I read yesterday, Spam. Okay, people are hoarding Spam. Seriously, like upgrade your tastes, Spam. I mean are you kidding me? Then the one that I can't understand at all, bottled water, people are hoarding bottled water. Okay, people, people, this is not the hunger games, okay? The sink is still going to work.

Fear often leads us to make dumb decisions and often make decisions that actually make a bad situation worse. Sort of like this post that I saw where it says, "To the people who have bought 27 bottles of soap leaving none on the shop shelves for others, you do realize that to stop getting Coronavirus, you need other people to wash their hands too, you great thundering wallop." Okay, I have no idea what a wallop is, but it's a great word, and I'm going to use it from now on, you wallop.

Fear causes us to make decisions that are actually make things even worse, like taking all the soap and so no one else can use it. So now you're going to get sick. And even in normal times, even in normal times, fear can lead to really bad choices. So students overbook themselves because they are worried that in fear that they're going to miss an activity or something they need on their resume for college. Or we won't open up in relationships because we're afraid of getting hurt and on and on and on.

Fear is one of the things that in the text we read, that the text we read talks about, where the Apostle Paul is writing to a younger man that he's mentoring named Timothy. Timothy had a fear problem, Timid Timothy. So Paul writes to encourage him. The verse we read is kind of interesting. It's not what you might expect because it says, "God did not give us a spirit of fear," but of what?

The studio audience said power. Yes, very, very good. Yeah, no studio audience, you can participate, all six of you. It'll make me feel better. Paul writes, it says, "God has not given us a spirit of fear." He goes on to say, "but a power," but you might expect a different word. You might expect, "God has not given us a spirit of fear but of courage," because that's the natural opposite of fear. But instead Paul says, "God did not give us a spirit of fear, but of power, love and self control."

Those three words, so that Paul is talking about a very specific kind of courage. This isn't just courage in general. This isn't like doing something like jumping out of an airplane with no parachute, which someone actually did a couple of years ago and landed in this giant net. That's one kind of courage, the stupid kind.

Paul is talking about a different kind of courage. I want to look at these three words, power, love, self-control, to unpack what does Paul... What's the kind of courage that Jesus gives his people, especially in tough times? The first thing is we move in faith, not fear. When we understand this first word power, and specifically the power of the cross. Paul means something very particular when he uses the word power, it's not power in general. He defines power in the next verse where he says the kind of power he's talking about in the next verse where he says, "Join with me in suffering for the gospel by the power of God. What does this power of God done that has been revealed through Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel?"

In other words, Paul is talking about a particular kind of power that is rooted and grounded in the cross. At the cross, that's where God pulled something good out of something very bad. Something as bad as Jesus's crucifixion and death, and he used it to forgive our sins, and to conquer death, and by raising Jesus again from the dead. See, the cross shows God's power to bring life out of death, to bring good out of evil. So we can have confidence even in difficult times because we know that God is going to bring something good out of them.

The one thing that I know, that I know, that I know, that God always does is he always, when the worst happens, he always pulls good out of it every time. I've told you all kinds of stories over the years of people who have had the worst things happen to them and yet God somehow used it and transformed it for good. What that means is that all-in Christians approach difficult times with really only one question in mind.

Your journalists are often taught to ask six questions to write a story. Who, what, where, when, why, and how. Of those six, there's really only one that all-in Christians focus on. All-in Christians are not focused on the why question, as in why is this happening? All-in Christians aren't focused on when, as in when will this be over? Or where, where will the virus go next? Or how, how will this affect my school, the economy, my job? All-in Christians don't focus on who, as in who can we blame? The politicians are taking care of that one for us, so that one's covered.

Now all those questions are normal and reasonable to ask. I've asked those questions a lot this week. How is this going to affect me and my family? How will this affect the church? When will this be over so we can get back to normal worship? Because preaching to an empty room, even though I know you're there, isn't nearly as fun as preaching when you all are here and I can get a sense of your reaction and your response. Although thankfully, we're Presbyterian, so the difference in response isn't actually that much. So that's a joke. That was a joke, okay. The band is nodding in agreement. That was a joke. I lost my place. That was a joke.

Oh, just as an aside, I also want to say just as an aside, we're going to work really hard over these next weeks to make the services as engaging as we possibly can. You could join, for instance, join in the chat that's happening right now. You can do that. There'll be something after this service. There'll be something for kids immediately following. Mrs. Lisa and Laura going to be doing something for kids, so I encourage you to stick around for that. Also want you to know we are re-purposing our staff right now, giving them different assignments so that we can care for all of you and care for our cities. So just that digression, wanted you to know that in digression.

Who, where, when, how, why, good questions. But what drives the question that drives all-in Christians? The question that all-in Christians focus on is what? What does God want to do with this? What is this for? What good thing is God going to use this for? Just off the top of my head, I can think of several ways that God could use this for good. For instance, there's the gift of time, and a lot of people have already noted this. In our normal lives, we are so busy, we don't have time to connect with God. We don't have time to build community. We don't have time for our family. Suddenly everything's been canceled. Nobody is wasting time in traffic because there's no traffic. If we use this extra time to connect

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with God and friends and family, we might end up when this is all over, we will end up more spiritually mature, emotionally whole, and have better relationships all the way around.

Then there's revival. We talk about revival. We have been praying for revival in our region for a while now. What if this is our chance? You've heard me say 80 zillion times. That's the precise number, I counted 80 zillion times I have said to you that one of the reasons Christianity grew faster than any religion in history is that when the plagues hit the cities during the Roman Empire, when plagues hit the cities, everyone including the doctors rushed out of the cities to avoid the plague. If you were here right now, we would do this interactively. I would ask you the question, "But what did early Christians do during the plague?" And you would say, "What? Rush in."

Thank you, studio audience. Yes, and you in your homes and your living rooms and your kitchen say, "Rushing in." That's what Christians did. Everyone else was leaving the city. Christians rushed into the city from all over the place to care for plague victims at the risk of their own lives. Sometimes they died, but they were fearless because they knew Jesus's resurrection assured them that they were going to rise again even if they die. The result was plague victims that got cared for survived at a higher rate. And guess who those plague victims when they had recovered, guess who they wanted to meet? Jesus. They wanted to know this Jesus who sent his followers into the city when everyone else was leaving to care for them.

The Romans saw that those early Christians seemed to be made of sterner stuff than your average Roman. They weren't afraid. They weren't thinking only of themselves. They weren't hoarding Spam like the rest of the Romans were doing. No, they courageously cared for others. It was such a contrast to the way everyone else was behaving, the Romans wanted to know, "Who is this Jesus that makes his followers so brave?"

Now these days, doctors can care for people better than the rest of us. So what's our version? What is our version of caring for the sick today? Well, for starters, you could instead of freaking out and hoarding things, we could check in on our neighbors either by phone or in person, keeping a safe distance and all of that, just to say, "How you doing?"

Especially check with people who are at higher risk for complications. You know, the older people and people with chronic health issues, checking on them. Maybe ask if you could do their shopping for them or some errands for them so they don't have to go out and risk exposure. Maybe it's to listen to an anxious friend or coworker talk through their fears because that can be super helpful.

This week I heard of a couple of high school students who, you know, school has been canceled, so now they have a bunch of time. They are offering to babysit for families that are right now scrambling to find childcare so they can go to their jobs.

If you go to a restaurant, if you're healthy and you go to a restaurant, tip big because restaurants are really suffering right now. Tip 30%, 40%, 50%. Tip really big. Maybe go online and buy some gift certificates from a restaurant to give them the cash now. Then when this is all over, you can go out to eat in celebration.

Another thing you could do is to be aware that some Asian people in our community and even in our church are getting some pretty negative comments, even just outright racist comments, blaming them for

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this disease, which is so stupid and I know you know that it's so stupid. Pandemics don't have a race attached to them. The deadliest pandemic ever, 1918 flu, probably started in an Army base in Kansas. But know that this is happening and just push back on that kind of nonsense and say, "This is dumb," because it is.

Another thing you could do is be aware that this is a time of heightened anxiety, and at times of heightened anxiety, people are more interested in hearing about God than in normal times. So maybe you could have a brunch on Sunday morning and invite some coworkers or neighbors who don't know Jesus to join you. Let them know in advance that part of this brunch is you're going to watch your church's live stream. Let them know in advance so it's not bait and switch. They may be more open to it right now than you would imagine, and just kind of let them hear about Jesus. Have a brunch. Just make sure everyone washes their hands.

Now is not the time for God's people to shrink in fear. Now is the time for God's people to move in faith and care for others in ways that show the world that Jesus is alive and that Jesus is Lord. A scared world needs a fearless church. A scared world needs a fearless church.

Think of it this way, years from now, right, years from now, when your kids or your grandkids or some friend looks at you and says, "Grandma, grandpa, what did you do during the pandemic?" You don't want to have to say, "I bought a 10 year supply of toilet paper." Okay, right, you want a better answer than that. God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power rooted in the cross that says, "Even when the worst happens, I will have confidence because I know God will use it for good."

Second, he has given us a spirit of love. The more we experience God's love, the more we're going to give that love away because it just overflows. Love is no frail thing. Love is powerful. Love can make people risk their life for somebody else. The Bible says perfect love drives out fear, so ask God to help you experience his love that will make you brave.

Then the third thing we've been given is self-control, spirit of power, love, and self control. Self control, we need that because see, courage is a choice. Courage is a choice to move in faith even when we are afraid. It does not take courage to do something that doesn't scare you. Just by definition, courage is when you feel fear, but choose to do the right thing anyway. We get God's courage through prayer, and scripture, and asking God to help, through worship and being part of worship.

BelPres, here again, you are doing a great job. Last week when we had online services only, we actually had higher attendance than for just a normal Sunday this time of year. Giving was even strong last week. So well done, BelPres. That's pushing back on fear. That's not letting fear rule your life. Well done. Keep at it.

Courage is a choice that when we feel fear we still do the right thing. So let me just give a couple of practical choices we can make, a couple practical choices we can make this week to push back on fear. First practical choice, boycott the merchants of fear and rage. Go on a fear fast. Certain websites, news outlets, politicians, talk radio shows on both sides have a vested interest in keeping you two things, angry and afraid. Because if you are angry and afraid, you're going to click on more links, you're going to listen to more talk radio, you're going to watch more news. And that's all revenue for them. Then you're going to vote the way the politicians tell you to vote if you're angry and afraid. So boycott them.

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Now I need to say, personally, I think our local media is doing a pretty good job on this. I am actually kind of impressed. I feel like locally we're not fear-mongering. So locally, I think media is doing a great job. Nationally, I'm not so sure. The merchants of rage and fear will always tell you all about the deaths, but never mention the far greater number of people who recover. They won't put statistics in context. If there are 100 studies done on COVID-19, they will pick the one out of 100 that has the most dire predictions, and that's the one they'll talk about.

Now don't hear what I'm not saying. I'm not minimizing. Don't hear what I'm not saying. This is a real thing. This is a serious situation, okay? And any death, every death is tragic. So let's be wise. Let's take precautions, but let's not fan the flames of fear. Feed your faith, not your fears. Don't stay constantly glued to social media, or talk radio, or news programs. Instead, read an uplifting book. Read the Bible. Call a friend or a family member. Listen to worship music, listen to sermons, pray, pray a lot.

Only get your information from reliable sources, CDC, World Health Organization, and public health departments. I know you know this, I know you all know this, and I know you know that not everything you read on the internet is true. I know you know that. But even just to indulge that headline just for a minute, puts those fearful thoughts in our heads. Boycott the merchants of fear and rage. Let's put them out of business. Wouldn't it be great if this just puts them out of business because we stop listening to those who fear monger.

Second practical step, focus on Jesus. Pray, pray, pray a lot, leave space for God to speak. You have those thoughts and maybe they're not your thoughts. Maybe they come from God. Continually remind yourself that Jesus is with you, and that he loves you, and that he will not forsake you. Sing worship songs that encourage you. One of my favorite hymns is called Be Still My Soul. It was written during the great depression in the 1930s, so it was written at a time of enormous, enormous fear. It says, "Be still my soul. Thy God doth undertake to guide the future as He has the past. Thy hope thy confidence let nothing shake. All now mysterious will be bright at last. Be still, my soul. The waves and winds still know his voice who ruled them while he dwelt below." Focus on Jesus because he makes us brave.

And then finally, third practical choice, follow the Holy Spirit's nudge to care for someone. Ask God to show you how you can care for others. Maybe one of the ways I mentioned a few minutes ago, maybe it's something God inspires you to uniquely do. If so, let me know about it so I can share it with the rest of the church as a good idea. Because see, if during this outbreak Christians care, first Christians care, most Christians care biggest for other people. It's going to point to Jesus, let's make Jesus go viral rather than this virus. When we care for others, it's good for them, but it's also good for ourselves. Because you know what happens when we stop thinking about our fears and our worries and focus on someone else, we get free of anxiety and fear. Then we see good things happening around us, which is just uplifting.

As most of you know. I was in Rwanda last week fulfilling some speaking commitments. While I was there, I visited the Center for Champions, which is the center that this church built in Rwanda that is right now helping under-resourced kids get job training, and education, emotional support, introduces them to Jesus. A lot of kids have found Jesus, and jobs, and gotten out of poverty because we, this church, we built that center in Rwanda.

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That was one of the times. There've been others, but that was one of the times that we moved in faith, not fear collectively as a church, but also as individuals. Many of you remember this, many of you were here back then, but some of you weren't. So let me just briefly recap. We did a capital campaign for three projects. One, the Center for Champions in Rwanda that I just visited. Second, Jubilee REACH that is helping under-resourced families the East side. Then third, to build our upper campus.

Price tag for all of that was double what this church had ever raised. The consultants we'd hired to help us with that, they said it was impossible, we couldn't do it. It was a three year giving period where we asked you to give over and above what you're already giving to this church, over and above to those three projects. So many of you who were there back then moved in faith, not in fear. Some of you delayed retirement so that you could give more. Some families cut everything they possibly could cut out of their schedule or out of their budget. No more lattes for three years, no more TV cable for three years, cut everything they could. Some of you cut everything you possibly could so you could give more.

Not only did we meet the goal, we exceeded it by \$2 million and collected all of it, which never happens. Collected all of that, even though two of the giving years were '08 and '09. Anyone remember what happened then? Worst recession since the Great Depression in the 30s and still you all gave, you moved in faith, not in fear and lots of good stuff happened.

I went to the Center for Champions that this church built through what you gave. So many, I'm happy to report so many good things going on there. Got to talk to graduates of the Center who are now electricians or carpenters or hairstylists. Some were planning to start their own business. All of them express so much gratitude for the Center for Champions that helped them out of poverty, and also and more importantly, introduced them to Jesus, and made them part of the community where they felt cared for and where they felt loved. Now their kids will not be born in poverty the way they were. Their kids will not be born in poverty and their kids will know Jesus. BelPres, 1,000s literally, no exaggeration, 1,000s of people in Rwanda will not be poor and they will know Jesus because you all moved in faith, not fear.

I was in Rwanda with our Modern Worship team and which includes a man named Adrian. Adrian is from Rwanda and he's on our staff here. He helps with New Hope Revival. In Rwanda, Adrian is a very famous musician, kind of Justin Bieber of Rwanda. When we were out, we'd be out in public, you could see people looking at him, and pointing at him, or people would stop and want a picture with him, or want an autograph. So he's very famous in Rwanda. I can't believe we get to have him on our staff.

Well, Adrian, along with Evan, our Modern Worship Director, Adrian and Evan and I went to the Center for Champions. The school officials told all the students that they had to come to this assembly because the pastor of the church that built their school was coming. When we walked in, they had these signs that said welcome and thank you and all of that. Guess what those students immediately noticed? Adrian, I could see them just whispering to each other, Adrian, Adrian. They're like, "Yay Adrian, what a cool day."

Imagine you were a student forced to go to an assembly because some American guy is coming and wants to talk to you. And you show up in surprise, American dude brought Adrian with him. Yay, right? They didn't even know I was there. Adrian and Evan, they led some songs with the students, encouraged them in their schooling. They will remember that until the day they die, the day they got to meet Adrian.

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Church, good things happen when we move in faith, not fear. Good things happen when we move in faith, not fear. So in this season of uncertainty, how can you move in faith, not fear in ways that encourage you and show the world that Jesus is Lord? Connect with Jesus in prayer, and scripture, and worship. Ask him to show you how you can care for others by checking in on them, or doing some errands for them, or anything God shows you to do. To help them, other people, but also to help us get away from our own anxieties and focused on someone else. Because when we are about God's business, we get braver because we know that God's purposes cannot ultimately be stopped. BelPres, what if this is our moment? What if this is our moment? What if this is a chance to spark revival or at least take a step in that direction?

For 2,000 years, Christians have stared down fear and moved in faith. For 2,000 years, Christians have looked fear in the eye and said, "Fear, go ahead. Go ahead, fear. Throw your best punch. Do your worst. God's purposes cannot be stopped. Mock us and we're going to bless you in return. Hate us and we're going to love you anyway. Cast us out, we're going to come back in. Tell us to shut up, we're going to keep talking about Jesus. Put us in prison, we'll convert the jailer. Whip us, we're going to sing hymns. We can do this all day, fear. You're not going to win this one. You might as well give up."

It's the physics of grace and you cannot stop it. A scared world needs a fearless church. Now is the time. Now is not the time for God's people to shrink back in fear. Now is the time for God's people to move in faith and not fear, and show the world that if the cross couldn't stop God's purposes, if death couldn't stop God's purposes, if all the powers of hell combined could not stop God's purposes, then neither will some microscopic virus stop God's purposes.

We may be in for some tough weeks here. We may be in for some tough times, but God will use it all for eventual good and his kingdom will grow. So BelPres, take heart. We are no longer slaves to fear. We are children of the most high God, our fortress, our stronghold, our savior. We shall not be moved.

Jesus, thank you that you make us brave. And so Lord we give you, we bring you all of our anxieties, uncertainties, fears, worries. Lord, ease our troubled minds and worried hearts, and make us brave, make us different. In a world that panics, make us the calm center of the storm in our own hearts, but also able to give that away to others. Lord, help us to have our eyes open for what you want to do with this time in our nation and in the world. How do you want your people to respond? What are you going to do with this, God? Show us so we can be a part of it. Make us brave. You're brave. You can make us brave. Your love cast out fear. So Lord, help us to know how much you love us. In your name, Jesus. Amen.

Discussion Questions: Read 2 Timothy 1:7-9a

1. Why do you think Paul wrote that God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power, love, and self control, instead of God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of courage, which would be the more natural opposite of timidity? Why did he choose the words, power, love, self control? How do each of those words make us brave?
2. From the context of verses 7-10, what else does Paul tell Timothy that make him braver?
3. If you fully put aside your "spirit of timidity" and acted in a spirit of power, love, and self control, how would you use your gifts in service to God and others?
4. In the current coronavirus climate, what are ways you can act with power, love, and self control?