

Calvary United Methodist Church
January 13, 2019

DO NOT BE AFRAID, I AM WITH YOU
Rev. R. Jeffrey Fisher

Children's Message:

Isaiah 43:1-3a

I invite our children to come forth at this time for the children's message. I believe there are a few in the congregation this morning. Good morning. Glad you are all here.

Did you go out and play in the snow early this morning? No snow persons out there today? Maybe go sledding? I hope you get a chance to today. (I took my dog out in it.) You took your dog out in it? Kind of cold out there this morning. It was only like 20 some degrees.

Well, I am glad you are here today because we are going to talk a little bit about what we usually do, about God. And particularly about God's love. I don't know how you experience God's love. I find God's love in a lot of places: in the warmth of the sunshine because I know God created the sun and the earth and the moon and the stars. I find God when I look at friendly smiles. And I believe God is working through other people's lives to make us feel happy and to bless us in so many ways. And I find God in so many places and yet there are a lot of places in our lives that there is fear. And God wants us to know that we ought not to have to live in fear in our life...we ought to know that God is with us.

There is this scripture in 1 John: where God's love is there is no fear because God's perfect love takes away fear.

We've often seen the sign of the heart, right? Does the heart typically remind us that somebody's in love with someone, right? Because it is the heartbeat when it is going that we know we are really alive. And I want you to know always that God loves you; God loves you very much. And God's love is shown to you through your parents and grandparents and teachers and friends and people at church. If we are really looking for God, we will see God everywhere because God is everywhere.

In His book, do you know what the book is called that God gave us? It is the Bible. The Bible was written by human beings but God gave them these words to write down so we would never forget him. He said this: For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting or eternal life. That's good news for us. We can have a great life here because God has given it to us as a gift.

Now, I mentioned before, when I want to find God in my toughest times...do you ever have tough times? You have a bad day at school, you have a fight with a family member, things aren't going well...I need a hug from God. Do you like hugs? Some people like hugs, some aren't real big huggers and that's okay, but for me, I want to believe that, just like when I was

sad and my mom and dad or family members that I trusted would hug me, I'd feel like: ah... everything is going to be okay. God wants us to know that fears—there is a difference between fearing and getting wise enough not to hurt ourselves—but God wants us to know that God will keep us comfortable. There is a place that we find when we are with friends, when you are with friends you probably feel pretty happy, don't you? And God wants to be our friend. God just wants to be our friend. We can talk to God every day, we can listen to God, we can see God so many places. He said: I want you to get rid of fear because I want you to know I'm with you no matter where you are.

Why do we have fears? Well, there are some things that are kind of scary. Did any of you ride a real high roller coaster? You've done some of those? Sometimes roller coasters or some rides look scary, or going into school for a new day in a new school and you don't know anyone—that can be pretty scary. Going to new places, meeting new people, going to doctor's offices...the list of what we could be afraid of could be pretty long, but God reminds us that God is with us. You are not alone.

I don't know about you, but if I am going to something scary, if there is somebody with me to hold my hand...can I hold your hand? Does it feel better? Yeah. It does for me. Because when I am with a friends I know I am going to be okay because someone else is with me in my trial, in my troubles. God says: I love you and I'm here for you all the time.

Now, when I was young we would go swimming and we weren't fortunate to have these swimming pools. Have you ever gone swimming? In pools. Tell me who is that way up there in the middle of the photo with that yellow pole sitting on a bench. Do you know what those people are called? A lifeguard. And what are they there for? To save you. Excellent! That's exactly right. They are there because if you get in trouble in the water they are there to save you. And God is our Savior means when we are in trouble, guess who wants to save us? God, all the time.

When I grew up, this is a river near McVeytown known as the Juniata River. We didn't have lifeguards. The water is not real deep there, but we would depend on other people to save us, called moms and dads and relatives and friends who knew how to swim when they took us to ponds, like this is Greenwood Furnace, it's a state park. And sometimes the waters weren't too clear. They were kind of...wondered if there would be some big monster in them at times when I was little. But there aren't big monsters in the water. But instead we just trusted Almighty God. But, do you think that young child knows how to swim already? Well, you know some children learn mighty young, even really, really young. But my guess is that happy smiles is because they are with someone they love and trust. You see, when we go through troubles, when we go through problems, the thing is to trust. So, when my father or my aunts and uncles and people would take me out in the water, my mom wasn't a swimmer so she wasn't going to go there because she was afraid. She didn't want to get hurt. See, a part of it is learning the knowledge to know how to swim so you don't have to be afraid.

So, we trust and sometimes it's not just with water. When we need a hand up with homework or we need a hand to get through some problem we are going through sometimes it is one person or a whole bunch of people, for when God's love is there, there is no fear because God's perfect love takes away fear.

So, if you have a fear of the dark or a fear of something else, remember not only are the hugs of your family and friends very real, there is no fear because God's perfect love takes away fear. We have faith that God is always with us. We anchor ourselves so that we don't get afraid.

So, I hope you'll remember this week: Don't be afraid wherever you are. If you are scared at all, God is with you. So, I want to offer you these treats again that Pastor Bob puts up here for everyone, it's so nice. Thank you for coming today. Have a wonderful week and I'll see you soon.

Message:

I'm wondering how many of you can remember the last time somebody saved you, even in a small way. I have had to depend on a lot of people. A few years ago I had a bad leg, bad knee, bad foot and some people saved me...they were able to get me to work. They picked me up and took me home. There are times recently when I was sitting at a red light and it turns green and you go to pull out and shoooo, you ever have that happen? And you say, "Thank God, someone could have just taken me out, but by God's grace..." and hopefully by God's grace we weren't the person not paying attention and went through the red light.

If we were to look over our weekly schedule, my guess is there is a lot of times we could thank God for someone who came into our life at just the right moment. And yet, we don't take enough time to just thank God for redeeming us. When he says this word today: don't be afraid, I am with you. While I want to thank all the people who have helped me in life, we need to remember God; we need to be thankful.

There are times in our history we forget the God who has redeemed us. The year was 722 before Christ. The people of the north, of Syria, came down and took the people of Israel out of their land into Babylonia and enslaved them. And God says: Don't worry, I'm coming for you. I'm going to set my people free.

Have you ever been down and out when you wondered how you are going to go on for sometimes generations, health, money, all kinds of issues; relational issues, sometimes we wonder how to overcome and we live in fear and we get in bondage to fear and we don't know what to do and God says: I am with you. I will not forget you.

There are several places around the world where there are statues of the Christ, the Redeemer. We are redeemed daily by our, if I had to look at how many times my parents redeemed

me, woof...the list is long. They picked me up through failures and through mistakes and there errors in life. And how much more the Heavenly Father has picked me up and has picked you up if we become aware of God's goodness in our life.

So what is it that we are afraid of? It can be the roller coaster of life. It's not always easy. Childbirth is wonderful, but it can be different. It can be difficult. There are those things with our finances that we are looking forward to a nice comfortable retirement and the market crashes and we get worried about where will we go and will we be comfortable and the list of what we are afraid of and I'm not even talking of the things like fear of the dark and fear of water and fear of flying. And God says to all these things: Have I not always been there for you? Will I not always be there? Sometimes through your friends and family and acquaintances, sometimes through strangers, but I am your God, I will redeem you, I have called you by name. You are mine. And it's not sort of like I own you, it's I'm here for you. I love you. Fear not, I have redeemed you, I have called you by your name. You are mine. It's a term of endearment when God says: I love you, my children. You are mine.

If your parents are capable, they are probably going to do what they can and our Heavenly Father will do all our Heavenly Father can do to be with us. Our parents don't always rescue us from everything because some of life is a learning experience and it has a curve that sometimes is very painful, but they do not let us down.

The fears are many and God says: wherever you are looking and sometimes we look so far off that we think: wow! I don't know what I want to do; I don't know where I want to go; I don't know what I want to be. And God says: Slow down. Wherever you go, however far the distance, I'll go the distance with you. I am your God, even in the storms and the raging seas, I am your God. I will be with you.

I mentioned to the children, I find God in my mind. I find God in my places when I know I am all alone, I have to envision God and embracing me as my mother or father or people I know who have cared for me that I know I will find comfort. When I lose the people I love, when I am disappointed with life, when things don't go my way, I have to find the comfort of God saying: you will be okay.

Hear those words: You will be okay. You will get through it. Otherwise we become enslaved, become bound up and not free at all to enjoy the gift of life.

We have a lot of symbols that we use for Christian faith: crosses and anchors and all kinds of butterflies and things for new life. But sometimes we are not anchored enough. The ships that go out into the ocean, even if you are in a small boat and you don't have an anchor, you are not going to say very secure if your rapid waters come. You have to have something to keep you secure. And I think it is found in Jesus Christ.

This week someone had a not sent to me and I reread it. It was from St. Anthony and it's a

reading that gave me a whole mix of emotions as I read it. It's St. Antony speaking to a blind man who spoke to him and he says these words: A blind person asked St. Anthony can there be anything worse than losing your eyesight? He replied: Yes, losing your vision. I was so excited when I thought that. I read that and I thought: vision, you have to have a vision. Where am I going? What do I want? Where am I going? In elementary school we already start asking children what do you want to be when you grow up. I'm still looking for that, right? Because it can change throughout life.

Where is your vision today? I think we, in this very affluent society, a vision is often stuck on a career where we can make good money, live in a comfortable home, live life big because most of us live very big lives compared to the rest of the world. We live in all of our comfort, talk about our vacations, talk about our retirement so we can get ready and die. Good Lord, there's got to be more, right? A vision is what can I do as an instrument of God. You see, we are not here for our comfort. God did not give us life just so we could have a good old time and have a party and die. God gave us life that firstly we are to glorify God. It's okay to have fun on the way. It's okay to have fun on the way, but what is your purpose in this kingdom for Almighty God? What is it? Have you lost your vision or is it time today to say: Lord, I need to talk to you again. What is it that you will have me, with the gifts you have given me because all of us are as different as the fingerprints we have, to find out what it is that God has for us?

As Christians I get so angry thinking about this this week. We look at our congregations. Now, we have a little snow today, but there are reasons our congregations are struggling. We have been unfaithful as the people of God. I'm not talking Calvary, I'm talking people who identify themselves as Christians in a nation that would like to call themselves Christian is anything but. Let's be honest here...anything but. We are a broken people. We are probably one of the most affluent people of the world and we are so caught up in sports and entertainment, which is where our money and our time and our pleasures and even our teaching to our children go, that we forget to teach about Christ. We become generation after generation after generation of people who don't know we have a redeemer, who don't know that we've been redeemed, who don't know that we need a savior, who don't know that we have someone who will always be with us.

Ten years ago I spoke with my superintendent about my crushed feeling as a pastor, that I've been nothing for 35 years now than a social worker. Now there is nothing wrong with caring for our elderly and the poor and the ailing and the imprisoned and the children and the orphaned. We are called to all of that, but you see, we are called to much more than that. The world can feed, but if we only look at temporal needs, most of this is temporal, 100 years or less, right? So, we feed the food pantry, which we are supposed to and should and ought to do, but if we don't offer Christ, if we don't offer a vision, if we don't offer people hope in prison, if we don't offer to the dying hope in Christ, what have we given them? Nothing. The vision of the people of God is to bring the kingdom of Heaven upon earth. So we are getting a lot of well-fed people, a lot of people who are cared for, a lot of people who have

their physical earthly needs met, but they are starving for life.

Pastor Bob mentioned at the first service that in the last decade or so he's buried a couple of years ago like 35 young people to the opioid addiction. My guess is they are looking for life and we are giving them stuff as parents and as family and friends, but they are not finding life. The problem in our culture is we are so absorbed into all these wonderful things, but they are not giving life. They are running on empty. They are looking for things in the wrong places. I think there is a country song about that, right? All the wrong places, they are running on empty.

A pastor I used to work with always reminded me: Jeff, you are always so running around busy, sort of like a chicken with the head cut off thing. There are many things to do, but you must choose what is the most important. I'm not saying sports are bad. I'm not saying entertainment is bad. I'm saying there is something better that needs to be a priority. It's called the Kingdom of God. Everything we do ought to be in some sort of moderation that there is always the premier, the number one, is Christ because if we don't choose God first and we put God at the end of the list, God dissipates from our life, from our culture, from our families and all of a sudden it is gone.

If I were to look at a lot of families today between the cell phones and the gadgets we have, there is very little time for God, to read God, to pray for God, to study God's Word, to get to know what it is to be a part of the Kingdom. And the world as it is sinking needs someone to throw the life preserver. We need salvation. We need a personal relationship with the Most High God.

One of the things I remember as a child that I think is missing in much of our culture because I can find lots of 20, 30, 40 and even 50 year olds, we are that many generations from those who have been faithful to teach. I hear Bible stories; now do I remember them all? No, but you remember the story of Joseph with the coat of many colors? His brothers despised him because he was you know what...that spoiled kid. So they threw him in the pit. He was brought out and he ended up saving not only the whole nation but saving his family. And he said: what you meant for evil for me God turned around and ended up for good. He didn't hold a grudge. He saw that he was an instrument of God's peace to save his nation.

Do you remember a story about a guy that got in trouble with the water and a whale? Jonah? It's a story to teach that we don't always go where we want. God wanted him to go to Nineveh and he wanted to go to Tarshish because he wanted those people to go to hell, he didn't like them. And God says: that's not my plan. You are going to go when I send you. The story in there is that you don't always get what you want. There are a lot of stories in there and sometimes you have to go where I send you and you have the power...do you know what happened when he started crying out in 40 days change or what else and guess what? The whole nation changed. Boy I wish America could hear that. Forty days the nation changed.

Ever hear of a man named Job? Had everything, lost everything. Covered with boils. His friends are asking what in the world did he do to make God this mad and his wife came out to her husband and said: Job, why don't you just curse God and die. With great wisdom he said: Naked I came from my mother's womb and naked shall I return. Blessed be the name of the Lord. In other words, God owes me nothing. Nothing! But he trusted Almighty God.

There is another powerful woman, superhero: Queen Esther, chosen by a king and yet the king made a declaration because of some trickery to kill all the Jews. Her uncle came to her and said: if you don't go to the king, which could have cost her her life, and tell him to change this, we are all going to perish including you. You see, while we have all these superheroes in the world and I don't mind superheroes, I watched them as a kid, it's fine to teach our children these things of culture, but it's the better thing to include with it Jesus Christ. Tell them the stories so that when they get the storms of life and when they come into trouble and when they face fears, they know they are not alone.

We are living in a world that's explosive, more in this country, I think, than anywhere. Our culture is imploding on itself with the hatred and the violence. You turn on the news, kidnappings and murders and drugs and it's always been there. But it's becoming so epidemic that we need to do something and the answer isn't one more war on something. The answer is not more taxes dollars. The answer is Jesus Christ. But you and I cannot be the little church mice who are silent any longer. We must teach our children and grandchildren, family members, when we ask where are they? It's not up to us as leaders alone to bring them. We must never nag our folks, no one likes to be bugged that way, but with loving care invite and encourage and teach to bring God's people to their knees in some ways. I really don't care where they worship as long as they come to the Living God. It doesn't have to be here, but culture needs Christ in the world today. We need to talk to God; we need to talk with God; we need to be in conversation that others can understand that it's okay to be angry at God when things go wrong. It's okay to ask God questions. For years we were told we couldn't do those things. Our God's a real conversational God if we are willing. We need to have those encounters.

I'm not sure when the last time you had that encounter for you. I grew up in a day when people would say: well, when were you saved? Well, June 24 of 1935 I gave...no I'm not looking for that. I'm asking: are you seeking God daily and saying, God, what is it today that you'll have me? Is there someone I could pray for? Is there someone I could visit? Is there someone in prison or a hospital or a shut-in or a homebound? What is that that you'll have because when we build that relationship we will be right where God wants us, right in the palm of God?

You see, one of the words we are not good at is submitting ourselves to God, making ourselves available as an instrument of God's peace because we think we own our lives. I'm going to do what I want to do. I'm going to do what I'm going to do. If it's not God's plan... remember how that flew in your house? When I'd tell my parents, well I know you...I'm go-

ing to do what I'm going to do. That didn't fly well with my mom and dad. Probably not for yours either. I think God has a reason when he says: You have to submit yourself to be. Ask what it is. Seek because otherwise we are just lost souls and the church of Jesus Christ has lost its vision. And it's time we realize when he said he left: Go ye therefore into the world. Our world starts at home and we need to make it happen.

I will give you what? Power? I will give you authority. I will give you everything you need to be transformers of the world. You and I are life changers and what a privilege to know that someone's trusting you with saving people's lives, putting them on a path away from destruction, away from destructive things that they can find new life.

I've had a couple of flat tires in recent weeks. Not really making my day. Friday I had another and so I pulled into the station out here on 22 and it was run by some Mennonite folks. And I said I don't know what is going on and he said well, we put 2 plugs in. It is still leaking. We think your tire wires are breaking and all these problems. So in the midst of the problems I started talking to the young woman there, to find out she was originally from the Belleville area where I was from. And her family is Mennonites and she had been a missionary in Thailand for eight years. She had to leave because she got too old under her parent's thing and her family then went to Haiti and I was asking about it and she said well her dad came home with an infection, bacteria something and died. And she says but even on his deathbed he looked to them and said he would do it all again. Choked me up.

God is not asking most of us to die for him. The question is could we live for him? Could we live for him? I thought, it's that easy, to love people around us unconditionally. Can we do that? Could we be light to people who are so sad in darkness? Could we lift up those who are down and those who are weary? Could we be a promise of life to others? The hand of God is always reaching in and inviting us to pull us up.

I too buried too many young people. I buried a 22 year old this week. 22. Struggling with a lot of things. It was an accident nevertheless, but isn't it time we stop the drain and start life? Life is a gift from God and we ought to do all that we can. We can still have fun. We can have a good life and serve God at the same time for God says don't fear things. Fear not, I have redeemed you; I've called you by your name. You are mine. I love you. I embrace you. When you pass through the waters, I'll be with you. When you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned. The flames will not set you on fire, for I, the Lord, am the Holy One, to Israel, your Savior.

How will they know? Only if we tell. Only if we are not tight lipped and we go and tell them the good news. This old hymn I love: In the dark of the mid-night, that I've oft hid my face while the storm howls above me there's not hiding place. May the crash of the thunder, Precious Lord, hear my cry; keep me safe till the storm passes by. Do you know it? Till the storm passes over, till the thunder sounds no more, till the clouds roll forever from the sky. Hold me fast, let me stand, in the hollow of your hand. Keep me safe till the storm passes by.

God wants to do that. One of the greatest joys of my life is when I see these photos of multiple generations. Some of you probably have them. Five generations in this photo. The greatest gift God has given to me was family who are faithful to tell me about God. I knew my great-grandfather. I knew my grandmothers and my mother and those after me. I am where I am today because they weren't tight-mouthed. They told me the stories of Jesus. They told me of salvation. They told me of what was there. There were times, I've shared before, my struggles with school. I was in wood shop my last three years, not academic. Shouldn't have gone to college, shouldn't have gone to seminary. I was called in twice and told I didn't belong there, and I said I know, but God wants me here. But every time I'd want to quit, and it was often, I'd come home and my mom said: you are going to be fine, remember God is with you. And I'd get off to seminary and the same speech from another professor: you don't belong here. And I'd want to quit and my mom said: You'll be fine. God is with you.

God is with us. I don't know your storms, but God is saying: you are fine. I'll use you right where you are today. God needs you and God needs all of us to have a vision of where it is God can use you. We are all equipped for what God needs us and we are blessed beyond measure to bring the Kingdom of God on earth. Let's get a vision and let's do it. Amen.