

“LIVING THROUGH FEAR”
Acts 2:22-28
Betania Baptist Church, Sighisoara, Romania
September 9, 2018

You all know that in 1939 Krakow, Poland, was occupied by the Germans. It happened pretty close to your “neighborhood.” The scene was not unique, either: Just as the Babylonians did more than 2500 years before, the Nazis tried to wipe out anybody that could offer resistance. They sent them to camps, or simply killed them. That included college professors. One student watched closely as his favorite was murdered. He himself was sent to a labor camp, from which he escaped. He spent the rest of the war hiding and building the very resistance the Nazis tried to avoid.

In 1944, there came another occupier. The student became a leading dissident once again. He was marked, but rose in the church hierarchy, first as a priest, then a bishop, and finally Karol Wojtyla became pope.

In 1979, John Paul II returned to Krakow from Rome, facing the same Russian occupiers that had been there for thirty-five years, and asked the Polish people to join him for an open-air mass in an empty field. He didn’t know if anybody would show up. The Russians tried to ensure no one came. But people had heard his words of reassurance over and over again: “*Be not afraid.*”

The words, or ones just like those, occur in the prophet Isaiah more than sixty times, in the Bible as a whole 365 times—once for every day in the year. So many people connected his words to the biblical tradition that they took hold, and *one million people* braved arrest or harassment to attend. “You must be strong, brothers and sisters,” he told them that day, “there is no reason to be afraid.” They no longer were.

That day a man in the crowd, Lech Walesa, a shipyard worker, bought a memorial pen. One year later, Walesa would use that same pen to sign into being a new trade union called Solidarity. There was a direct connection, then, between that day and the organization that would one day overcome all the fear, oppression, and evil. Their

peaceful resistance had a ripple effect: Later, in Bucharest, one woman standing in a crowd before the dictator, as the wall came down, called out “Liar!” Then ten more yelled it. Finally, thousands took up the mantra. Fear had been overcome once again. Condoleezza Rice, describing this day described to her by Romanian witnesses, summarizes this moment for us: “A moment comes in every revolution when people are no longer fearful...”¹

Fear can be an overwhelming emotion. It can paralyze. People that are fearful in such a situation often believe they *deserve* to be enslaved. There was little reason to believe they should not be afraid in this case. Poland was occupied, a land of slaves, and informers were everywhere. The words, though, spoke to that fear.

Till that moment in Krakow, that moment in Bucharest, overcoming fear was unimaginable. But when people are convinced to release their fear, their liberation is assured. Jesus used the same message over and over.

It was almost as if Jesus’ every word was all aimed at one man: his first disciple, Peter. In his time the Romans played the Nazi/Soviet role. They instilled fear any chance they got. They ravaged the Galilee shortly before he was born, killing untold numbers of people that rose up in the instability that arose in the wake of King Herod’s death. What happened next is described this way:

By autumn, the Roman armies had swept through many of the towns and villages of the country, raping, killing, and destroying nearly everything in sight. In Galilee, all centers of rebellion were brutally suppressed, the rebel-held town of Sepphoris was burned to the ground, and all its surviving inhabitants were sold into slavery....

Those left living in Galilee and the other regions of the Land of Israel in the wake of the bloody Roman campaigns of reconquest were surely not converted to enthusiastic support of the rule of Caesar by the violence of the legions. They were merely too frightened and vulnerable to make their true feelings known right away. This was the atmosphere of numbed sadness and fear of Roman

¹ Condoleezza Rice, *Democracy: Stories from the Long Road to Freedom* (New York: Hachette 2017), p. 194.

repression in which the young Jesus and other Galileans of his generation were raised.²

Fear of death was a powerful reinforcement for the Roman legions. It's no wonder Tacitus wrote that "The Romans created a desert, and called it peace." The answer came, first, at the Jordan River, when from the heavens came a voice, "*You are my beloved Son....*"

When you hear the words, "*Be not afraid,*" you can be sure there is something to fear. Fear of power, of death, fear for your family, for their health and well-being, for your future—they are fuel for what scares us. But those words resonated among Jews generations before Peter. Abraham, Moses in the exodus, the Psalms, the words of Jeremiah to the king of Babylon, the message of "Second" Isaiah that begin chapter 40, "*Comfort, O comfort my people,*" followed closely by, "*In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,*" and finally, "*lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear*"...if God liberates, could there be little doubt Jesus would have used them, too?

Mark doesn't give us in describing Peter much of which to be proud. From time to time, he tried to cover his insecurities with bluster ("*Lord, do you want us to call down fire from heaven...I won't deny you, Lord...*," and then, indignantly, "*I do not know this man....*")—Peter was not naturally a courageous man. He was also a little foolish and silly, yet it seems he was the center of Jesus' efforts, and leader of the group.

His position in life was not an elevated one. Being a fisherman was also dangerous work. In chapter 6, for example, Peter and the others were fishing when a storm came up suddenly. They were fearful they would drown. It was not an unreasonable fear in a time when nobody knew how to swim. They then saw Jesus walking near them on the water, saying to them, "*Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.*" It's easy to imagine Peter

² Richard Horsley and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Message and the Kingdom: How Jesus and Paul Ignited a Revolution and Transformed the Ancient World* (New York: 1997), pp. 18-21.

telling this story and gaining inner peace, the peace the highly strung fisherman would need, one day.

On that long road to Jerusalem, Jesus' efforts finally would bear fruit. "*You are the messiah, the Son of God*" Peter would finally proclaim. Fear, of the Romans, of himself, no longer ruled him.

It's the same Peter that in Acts 2 would launch the Christian movement. Peter was aware of his guilt, and told the people gathered they too were all guilty of lynching Jesus. "*But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.*" There had to be a purpose behind that. If God could do that, there was nothing he would *not* do for his followers. The notion that Jesus would never desert them he drew from the psalms, saying, "*you will make me full of gladness with your presence.*" In the future, come what may, he, you, I will never be alone.

The faith that God will preserve us rests, even now in the twenty-first century, on one man's witness, the witness of fearful, weak, silly Peter. When we accept our weakness and our vulnerability, we then gain solidarity, and fear transformed becomes strength.

Given all that Jesus and his followers had to face, how could that be *anything but* "Good News?" Given all we face, now, today, how can admitting we are weak, vulnerable, and full of fear, yet can become strong and fearless—how can that be anything but "Good News," too?