

## When Fear Meets Faith

Based on Psalm 27, Matthew 8:23-27, & Luke 10:38-42

A Message Offered by Toby Jones to the People of ChxUCC on March 15, 2026

In case you haven't noticed, fear is on the rise in America. Studies indicate that Americans are more fearful and anxious today than at any point in recent history. The Chapman University Survey of American Fears highlights that over the past decade, fear has become a larger, more intense part of daily life, with people worrying about these 4 issues: 1) fear of corrupt government officials making decisions that are not for the country's benefit and may lead us into another world war, 2) fear for our physical safety, 3) fear of economic insecurity and not being able to afford our future, and 4) fear of our widening political and social division leading to civil unrest and violence here in America.

I don't know about you, but I will freely admit to having all four of these fears in the last year alone. What's worse, as a father of a bright, talented, and amazing daughter, I've watched her being affected by fear of these very same things. It's not right that an 18-year-old college-bound American has to grow up harboring such fears. But such is 2026 America. And, so, as followers of the Rabbi Jesus, we must ask, what does our faith tell us about how to manage such fears?

Well, our 3 passages for the morning all show how our faith ancestors dealt with fear in their lives. In Psalm 27, the Psalmist finds tremendous comfort in comparing the strength of his God – Yahweh – to the sources of fear in his life. “The Lord is the stronghold of my life – of whom shall I be afraid?” He goes onto list some of his most pronounced and troubling fears – the wicked advancing against him, a besieging army, and even war itself. His response to these very real fears is to “dwell in the house of the Lord” and “gaze on the beauty of his face.” He also mentions “hiding in the shelter of God's tabernacle,” where God “sets his feet upon a rock.”

All of these steps of faith the Psalmist takes have to do with putting himself intentionally IN God's presence. As the writer says in verse 8, “My heart says to ‘Seek God's face!’ Your face, Lord, I will seek.” This theme of God's face is repeated throughout Psalm 27, for back in verse 4, he says, “One thing I ask from the Lord, this only do I seek; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord and gaze

upon the beauty of his face...”

To me, this suggests that as fear rises in our lives, we need to place ourselves in God’s presence in whatever ways we can, so that we can get a glimpse of Her face. It’s a bit like when our children were very young and something frightened them – whether it was the darkness of their bedroom or the loud noise of a thunderstorm – and we would pick them up and hold them up close to our face. That’s all they would need to feel better and know that everything would be alright.

In Matthew 8, we read the famous story of the disciples in that small boat with Jesus when a whopper of a storm blew in. As the waves crash over the boat and the wind howls, the disciples start to freak out. Their understandable fears rise up and begin to dictate their actions. Jesus, meanwhile, is asleep in the very same boat. They cry out to him, and he calmly reminds them of their faith and how that should make them less afraid, less tossed about by their fears.

Notice that, like the Psalmist, the disciples – in their fear – move closer into the presence of Jesus. They crowd around him in the boat and “seek his face.” This is how faith responds to fear – by moving closer to God – our source, our rock, our shelter from all storms. If you’ve been walking through Lent with the Psalms we’ve provided, you’ve heard, again and again, that “the Lord is our refuge, an ever-present help in times of trouble.” God has resources that we simply don’t have on our own. The things that overwhelm us don’t overwhelm God, not even the stormy seas. At the conclusion of this story in Matthew, the disciples say, “Who is this, that even the winds and the waves obey him?” Drawing close to God, as we move more deeply into fear, reminds us of God’s incredible reservoir of resources and power.

So, what does it actually look like to move close to God in a time of trouble? How, exactly, are we to put ourselves in a position to ‘see God’s face’ as all manner of fears swirl around us? Well, it starts with a heart of faith that is inclined toward God. If we’re not grounded in our faith in Jesus, we won’t think of turning toward him or seeking his face when fear overtakes us. When you think about it, that’s part of why it’s so important for us to gather for worship every Sunday. This act of coming together is one of the rituals that inclines our hearts

toward God. The prayers we say here, the songs we sing, and the scriptures we read are all designed to root and ground our hearts in faith, in communion with the God and Creator of the universe. Have you noticed that every week I try to give you some assignment, some particular thing to work on that will incline your heart to God over the next six days?

A second thing we can do to put ourselves more directly in God's presence and to seek his face is best articulated in Psalm 46:10, a Psalm we looked at back on Wed. March 4. "Be still and know that I am God..." We can be still...We can stop...we can sit quietly...we can close our eyes and breathe deeply. And, when you think about it, being still is actually the very *last* thing we tend to do when wrapped up in our fears. The more I feel afraid, the more rapidly I start moving and spinning and grinding. Why do I do that? Because fear makes me feel out of control, and so I start scrambling around for something I CAN control. It may sound a little crazy, but I often do a bunch of housecleaning when I'm caught up in fear and powerlessness. Cleaning the house makes me feel like I'm in control of something, like I can make my immediate surroundings better. But you know what that won't do...it won't draw me more deeply into God's presence or enable me to see God's face. Stillness does that, but not in the way we might expect it to.

You see, because we live so frenetically, swirling around like tornadoes through the world, stillness is truly difficult and terribly uncomfortable for us. So, most of us avoid it like the plague. Shelley and Bill Wadland have been hosting sessions in our chapel on Wednesday and Thursday evenings where people can practice silence and contemplation together. But nobody shows up to these sessions, and do you know why...? Because silence and stillness is too uncomfortable for us. And do you know why...? Because we can't control it...because our minds are just too used to racing around, and we can't calm them down....Stillness and silence are things that make us feel OUT of control. Stillness confronts us with how out of our control things really are in our lives, beginning with our minds. But here's the irony: that crazy monkey mind that confronts us every time we try to be still for a few minutes is designed to show us just how much we need God, how much we need God to show us His face, so we can get off the hamster's wheel. Most of us give up on silence and stillness far too soon,

because it feels so out of our control. We prefer things that give us the illusion of control - like housecleaning. And that brings us to today's final passage.

In the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke, Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus, are graced with the presence of Jesus. He's in their home for what turns out to be their last time with him – at least physically. Mary drops everything. Luke says that Mary simply sat at Jesus's feet listening to every word he said. She stares at his face and drinks up his every word. Martha, on the other hand, starts spinning wildly. She concerns herself with cleaning, cooking, and making everything just right for Jesus. Martha chooses the illusion of control; she wants to do-do-do; produce; produce; produce. Martha sees her doing as superior to Mary's sitting, staring, and listening, so much so, in fact, that she calls upon Jesus to send Mary into the kitchen to assist Martha in the production line. But Jesus doesn't. Instead, he affirms that Mary has chosen the better portion, the one thing that matters most. Mary is seeking Jesus's face, sitting in silence with Jesus. There's a time for cleaning your house and cooking up a nice meal. But there's a time for sitting silently in the presence of Jesus, and believe me, when we're afraid, when we're freaked out about what's going on in the world and in our lives, that's a time for sitting with Jesus. That's a time for seeking his face.

And here's the thing...throughout history, the people of faith who've practiced sitting in silence and getting through that initial discomfort of monkey mind, eventually come to a point of feeling directed by God's Spirit. They're inspired to act in particular ways that matter – protesting, contacting their elected officials, joining with others to take action on behalf of those who are suffering. Silence and contemplation, in other words, generally leads to productive social action, not house-cleaning, but socially transformative action, empowered by the very Spirit of God. When we seek God's face in the midst of our fear, we're way more apt to have a positive impact in our community and world. It was out of my own commitment to silence and contemplation that our partnership with Guatemala was born.

So, if you're afraid these days, don't swirl and spin. Be still, seek God's face, and know the God who is our refuge, an ever-present help in times of trouble. Amen.