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Donald W. Sjoberg

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HISTORICAL SERIES, 4

Have No Fear

Donald W. Sjoberg

*National Bishop (Ret.), Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada
Winnipeg, Manitoba*

(Editor's Note: This sermon was preached 4 July 1993 at the closing service of the Fourth Biennial Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada [ELCIC], held in Vancouver, British Columbia, at the University of British Columbia. The Rev. Donald W. Sjoberg, the first National Bishop of the ELCIC, served in that ministry from 1986 to 1993 and did not, at this Convention, seek a further term. Thus his theme of "Have no Fear" held a peculiar relevance to this very young Church as it entered its first transition to new leadership. Prior to this ministry he had been Bishop of the Western Canada Synod of the Lutheran Church in America from 1970 to 1985.)

Text: Matthew 10:24-33

Xenophanes, the Greek philosopher, 6th century BC, named three fundamental questions which should be asked of a friend: "When did you begin your journey in life? From what place did you start? When did fear intrude itself?"

Of the three, the fear factor probably has the greatest influence throughout our lives. Fear may keep us safe as we avoid dangerous situations. At times fear may give us a needed shot of adrenaline and motivate us. Jesus says his followers must overcome this type of fear.

In today's Gospel reading Jesus prepares the disciples for bold witnessing in spite of those who have power over them – religious authorities, governors and kings, and even family members turning against them. They will be called satanic and one can imagine how damaging and hurtful that would be. They will be brought before councils, flogged in synagogues, dragged before authorities, threatened, imprisoned and killed. They will feel abandoned and helpless. They would have every reason to be afraid.

But Jesus says, “Have no fear of them.” Truth will win out. “For nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known.” God’s Word will be proclaimed boldly, sometimes by surprising people. What is masked by hypocrisy and deceit will be revealed. Even the earth will give up the bodies of the victims, and the perpetrators will be brought to justice. The cries of the people will be heard. Witness to the truth takes priority above the fear of punishment or even familial loyalties.

In such situations I would have every reason to fear. But it is amazing how people can rise above such fears. Something else is stronger. Six years ago at the concluding convention service in Ottawa, I invited Dean Simon Farisani from South Africa to sing the song he sang when he had been imprisoned and tortured.¹ Looking at his face as he sang I imagined the likeness to the face of Christ as he set out to Jerusalem. Farisani had many things to fear, but God had given him a song and a strength. In the words of Isaiah, “for the Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been confounded; therefore I have set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame” (50:7).

Jeremiah seemed an unlikely prophet with his fear of public speaking and lack of experience. A U.S.A. poll showed that the number one fear for people was public speaking. Death ranked number six! Despite Jeremiah’s fears he is called to be a prophet and continues to prophesy even though he is deceived, disregarded, and made a laughing-stock. He confesses that if he were not to speak, “there is in my heart, as it were, a burning fire shut up in my bones” (20:9). When we feel passionately about something we overcome our fear of speaking.

We have all seen this at conventions when a nervous delegate comes to the mike to speak from the heart. Some years ago, at a Lutheran Church in America convention, a resolution dealing with sexual abuse was presented to the convention and it seemed it was about to pass without much debate or discussion. Then a woman came to the microphone to say she had been a victim of sexual abuse and that we must name the abuse and provide help to the victims as well as to confront the perpetrators. “There are others here with similar experiences,” she said, and invited them to stand. It was an electric moment as others stood. Needless to say, action on the resolution took on new meaning. Sexual abuse is only one of many

issues the church is called to address and we do that best by listening to those who have been hurt and marginalized, by our willingness to risk being misunderstood and to change our way of thinking.

When Archbishop Tutu appeared before the South African Eloff Commission of Enquiry he testified: “The most awful thing that the authorities can do is kill me, and death is not the worst thing that can happen to a Christian. What is worst? Woe to me if I preach not the whole gospel.”

The context in which we bear witness is vastly different from that of South Africa and other countries of the world. When Archbishop Tutu came to the World Council of Churches Assembly held at this university ten years ago, he commented about the differences for the Church in North America as compared to South Africa. “Don’t feel sorry for us,” he advised, “for in some ways it is clearer for us to confess our faith in South Africa.”

Have no fear! Fear not those who can destroy the body but not the soul. Fear and love God much more, as we have learned in our catechism.² God is at the centre of life, not to be ignored. The less we love and fear God, the more things we become anxious about, and the more our fears stand in the way of witnessing boldly and clearly in a world very much in need of healing.

Zbigniew Brzinski, former national security advisor to the President of the United States, in his book *Out of Control*, mentions three problem areas: economic, social, and spiritual. In a television interview he stated that something can be done about the economic problems, possibly also about the social, but unusual intervention is required in the spiritual or metaphysical area. What he sees as unusual intervention is the mission our Lord has called and empowered us to do.

Years ago it seemed our mission in the world was a little clearer as missionaries went to other countries and new congregations were being started in record numbers. Being “sent into the world” is different today because the world has changed. People in other nations are reminding us to work for justice and peace where we live and to be in solidarity with them.

Do not be afraid! These are words spoken to God’s people when they are told they are becoming part of something much bigger. So it was when God spoke to Abraham the wandering Aramean, to the renegade Jacob, to prophets, to Zechariah and Elizabeth, to Joseph

and Mary, and to the disciples. They are words also for us. We too are invited to become part of God's saving mission in the world. Be open to God's surprises. Do not give in to despair but live in the confidence of God's kingdom and the promises of our Lord. Be part of God's future. "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32).

You are loved by God. You are the baptized. Do not deny God's covenant with you. You acknowledge that covenant when you gather with others for worship, hearing God's Word, sharing in the meal, proclaiming the gospel in word and deed, serving those in need and striving for peace and justice.³ We are differently gifted, but each gift is to be used with confidence and courage for the sake of the world God loves.

Have no fear! These words are from Jesus to us today. May we hear them as words of hope and promise *in spite* of our hesitancy, our fear, our failings – even our denials. Our Lord remains faithful "for he cannot deny himself" (2 Timothy 2:13).

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

Notes

- 1 The Rev. T. Simon Farisani, a black Lutheran pastor from South Africa, was heavily involved in the struggle against apartheid. Already detained and tortured in the 1970s, he was imprisoned, from November 1981 through much of June 1982, "for a crime he did not commit, tortured for preaching that apartheid is the policy of the devil and mocked for his religious beliefs. By February 1982, Farisani was nearly dead. Normally a robust and tightly packed 200 pounds in a 5-foot-7 frame, Farisani weighed only about 120 pounds. He suffered a heart attack early that month and was hospitalized for a total of four months." In October 1982 he was allowed to visit West Germany, Lutheran world Federation officials in Geneva, and North America." ("Tortured South African Lutheran Pastor Does Not Feel Hatred," *Lutheran World Information* 6/83.)
- 2 In his "The Small Catechism," Martin Luther begins his explanation of each of the Ten Commandments with the words, "We are to fear and love God so that ..."
- 3 From the liturgy of the "Affirmation of Baptism," *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978), p. 201.