

"FREED FROM FEAR"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
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### INTRODUCTION

It happened on May the 26th, 1985. Flight Number Fourteen (Peoples Express) from San Francisco to Newark was ready to depart when suddenly a passenger with an intense Eastern Mediterranean look bolted from his seat and ran for the EXIT door. Knocking over a startled flight attendant and then a couple of security officers, he frantically tried to escape from the Terminal before a police officer tackled him and pinned him down. Was he a terrorist? NO, not at all. He was just an average American who was afraid to fly and because of his fear of flying and being locked into the confines of a Boeing 707, he managed to cause a lot of upset and confusion.

All 200 passengers were quickly ordered off the plane. All luggage was removed and checked. Police searched for a bomb. Passengers fumed over the delay and all this time the embarrassed man was trying to convince airport officials that he was simply afraid of flying. The story made national news programs and it made its way into just about every paper across our land.

The poor guy didn't understand why he was afraid of flying. He didn't expect the plane to crash, nor did he expect it to be hijacked. About the only thing he knew was that as he sat inside the plane and heard the doors slam shut, he felt as if he were choking.

### DEVELOPMENT

Fear can do some terrible things to us. It can cause us to make fools of ourselves. It can limit aspirations and limit our achievements. Sometimes it makes us see things that aren't even there!

You've heard about the American tourist visiting Edinburgh castle in Scotland. He came running down to the entrance of the castle, pale as a sheet, telling the man at the door that he had just seen a ghost in an upstairs corridor. "Aye, laddie...and did it give you a start?" asked the Scotsman,

"To tell you the truth" said the tourist, "I didn't need one!"

Those of you from out Nebraska way, may recall that sad incident that was caused by fear at the Omaha Zoo. Not too long ago 23 wallabies died after stray dogs got into the zoo one night. The dogs were not able to get into the wallaby enclosure...but they didn't have to. The wallabies died from internal injuries suffered while crashing into the fence and into one another. The barking of the dogs scared them to death! Twenty-three wallaby carcasses, including fifteen adults and eight babies, testified to the consuming strength and intensity of fear..

One only wonders...how often and how many of us give into the bondage of fear? I've known husbands and wives who were afraid to stand up to their spouses, and employees afraid to stand up to their employers, sales people who have failed in their work because they feared rejection. We've known young people who have messed up their lives because they were afraid to say "NO" to the crowd, and married folks who have gotten caught up in infidelity out of fear that they are no longer desirable, and old people who have given up on life because they no longer have confidence in their ability to cope with the demands of life. The list goes on and on of the lives that have been "crippled" by fear. And so it's GOOD NEWS to hear Paul's word from today's scripture...especially that line,

"For you have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption."

Now this is a word that St. Paul is addressing to the believers, and it says a number of things to us that it never hurts to hear.

### FEAR IS OUR ENEMY

First-off, it's saying to me that fear is a real enemy to us. How many times we come across those words in the Bible, "Fear not...." "Fear not...." Remember that the call to Christ is a call to boldness. It's a call to let our lights shine for all the world to see. It's a call to courage. The opposite of faith is not doubt - it's fear. Fear is our enemy. Fear tends to distort reality.

Duane and I were talking earlier this week about the use of stories and illustrations in our sermons. Across the years, those sermons that I have remembered others preaching have been those with stories. They let the light in on the point that's being made, so I use them...as you may have noticed. Anyway, Duane spoke of Tom Boomershine who is at Union Seminary right now and is a preacher who uses stories. Here's one of his, taken from his book, Story Journey.

Tom Boomershine (and I like that name)...tells of a frightening experience that happened to him when he was about ten years old. He and his friend, Jim, were out sledding in a local park. Off to one side was a wooded area...and to the other side was a cemetery and an open field. It was a typical winter day with long shadows being cast on the snow from the clouds above. Usually there were a lot of kids there, but this day they were all alone in the park...sledding.

At one point, Jim called out to Tom Boomershine,

"HEY...Boomer...did you see that...over there in the cemetery...it looked like something was moving." Tom Boomershine looked, but saw nothing except trees and tombstones. After a minute or so, his friend said...."Guess it was my imagination, Boomer...but I'd swear I saw something moving out there...over there...in the cemetery...."

Well, it took a bit of the fun out of the sledding the rest of the afternoon. The boys were just a bit nervous, a bit afraid, but they kept on sledding, trying to be cheerful, but it was a losing battle. It was just too late to be cheerful. Boomershine was scared and suddenly his friend Jim shouted,

"Look, Boomer...over there...it's a..it's a panther...."

Tom looked and to this day he swears he saw a big, black panther...running down through the cemetery, leaping over the fence and coming right for them. The boys turned and ran with all their might, afraid for their very lives.

As Tom Boomershine ran through the woods he could hear the panther getting closer and closer behind him. He was terrified. As he got closer to home, he tripped over his sled and fell down into the snow. He knew he was done for! He froze, just waiting to feel the hot breath of the panther and his claws on his back. But nothing ever happened! And after a couple of moments that seemed like a lifetime, he got up and somewhat to his surprise, he ran as fast as he could to his own house.

He told his mother what had happened, but she assured him that there was no panther out there. The imaginations of those two boys had been working overtime. There was no real danger, but they thought there was...and they experienced a gut-wrenching fear.

Someone has turned the word "FEAR" into an acronym. Fear, they say, is: False Evidence Appearing Real. FEAR. When we fear, we have a false view of reality. Fear can make us give up even before we get started. And it can cause us to take an alternate path rather than the road that leads to our proper destination. It can make us see obstacles rather than opportunities. Fear is our enemy. I was brought up, as some of you were, with that phrase of FDR's, "The only thing we have to fear is FEAR itself". And someone has said that 85% of the things we worry about never happen. The same, I think, is true with fear.

It can and does distort reality. While it may serve a useful function in isolated circumstances, when it becomes a pervasive influence in our lives, it is destructive. So then, you ask, what is the cure? And how does one go about getting freed from this curse of fear?

#### A COMMITMENT TO BOLDNESS

For one thing, we need to begin with a real commitment to BOLDNESS. We need to acknowledge that fear is the opposite of faith. It's something of a spiritual problem. Paul is saying to us in this passage,

"For you have not received the spirit  
of bondage again to fear" (Romans 8: 15)

And consider for a moment the example of Paul. Here was a man who was confronted with shipwrecks, imprisonment, beatings and all manner of physical and social persecution. There's no way he could have become an "Ambassador for Christ" if he had given in to his fears. And neither can we!

We don't often talk about the "risk" of faith, but there is risk involved. Jesus, Himself, talked in terms of losing one's life in order to save it. That kind of talk is not for timid souls. You and I know that there are lots of folks out there who would never willingly "risk" losing their lives, folks who are set on minimizing their risks. They're a little like the African impala which can leap to the height of over ten ten feet and cross a distance of more than thirty feet, but these are creatures who can be kept in an enclosure in any zoo with a mere three foot solid wall...so I'm told. An impala it is said will not jump if it cannot see where it's feet will land.

How contrary this is to the call of Christ in our lives. We've got too many timid saints, too many believers who refuse to live out their beliefs, too many who are not willing to take that "leap of faith"...and trust...some even remind me of Olga Frankevich. Remember hearing about her last December?

Olga Frankevich fled Soviet Security Police during a Stalinist purge in 1947. Last December she emerged from a house in the western Ukraine where she had been hiding under a bed for 45 years. Her slightly bolder sister had roamed the house during that time, but had never left. But imagine...hiding under a bed for 45 years? Jesus said,

"Let your light so shine...(don't hide it under a bushel or a bed)" Make a new commitment to spiritual boldness!

Let the world know what you're made of. Be more concerned with being respected than being liked! Make a commitment here this morning to a bit more boldness and courage in your life.

WE HAVE BEEN ADOPTED

But wait a moment. There's more to Paul's word for us:

"For you have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you have received the spirit of adoption."

You and I have been adopted. Try to visualize in your mind the wealthiest person in the world coming up to you and saying, "I've decided to legally adopt you". And then he adds, "....that means that some day everything I have will be yours". Think how your life would be changed. And now imagine the Lord of the universe coming up to you and saying the same sort of thing, but that, dear friend, isn't a dream - that's a fact. That has actually happened to us. You and I have been adopted by God. Why are we so afraid? Do you know who your Father is?

I was touched and moved by the following story told by a Dr. Rodney Wilmoth who was down in Texas a few summers ago, lecturing. Apparently the pastor of the church where he was speaking had a son named Dolph, 27 years ago, still at home with his parents because he was born with Down's Syndrome. Dolph is a great joy to his family and his friends. He's got a warm sense of humor and he sings in the church choir and he also has a job which he takes seriously.

One day he was riding to church with his father and he said to him,

"Dad...I wish I could drive a car." His father's answer was kind and gentle...."You know why you can't drive, don't you?" "Yes" replied 27 year old Dolph...."because I have Down's Syndrome and in the state of Texas, I can't get a license"

Later when Dr. Wilmoth was completing the lecture at the church where Dolph's dad was minister, he opened the floor to questions. Dolph asked him,

"If Jesus saw me...do you think He would see someone who is not normal? Would he see someone with Down's Syndrome?"

A quietness settled across the church as people wondered how Dr. Wilmoth would answer the question. He said,

"Dolph....I believe that Jesus would see what I see. When I look at your....I do not see someone with Down's Syndrome. I see a wonderful, delightful child of God."

It was obvious that Dolph liked the answer. Beaming, he said:

"I know just what you mean...because when I receive communion and see the hands of my dad giving me the bread, I look up and I do not see my dad. Instead, I see the face of Jesus".

Isn't that beautiful. Dolph has something you and I need. He knows that he has been adopted. Many of us need to start living out our "adoption" as sons and daughters of a God who has come to us in the face of Jesus.

Sometime back a retirement party was held out in Chicago for Michael Jordan. And whether you're into basketball or not, you've heard of Michael Jordan, I'm sure. Phil Jackson, coach of the Bulls and a preacher's son from out there in Montana, college in North Dakota... a man I've long admired since his playing days here with the Knicks in the early seventies... told of diagramming a play on the sidelines in a critical game, only to have Michael Jordan dismiss it, saying, "Get the ball to me and get everyone out of my way".

Jackson responded, "Michael...I'm the coach and I'll call the plays!" Then Jackson turned to the other players and said,

"Get the ball to Michael...and then get out of his way".

Some may feel this is a frivolous story with which to end a sermon on fear, but that is basically my message this morning. When those times of fear take hold and when it seems the light will never come and you have no where else to turn, give the "ball" to Jesus and get out of the way. Go out and play the game without fear...play loose and play your game to the best of your ability. As you do, I think you'll discover what others have found to be true. Jesus will not let you down. A poet - anonymous - has written these lines:

"Doubt sees the obstacles. Faith sees the way.  
Doubt sees the darkest night. Faith sees the day.  
Doubt dreads to take a step. Faith soars on high.  
Doubt questions, 'Who believes?' Faith answers, 'I'"

PRAYER We pray that our faith in You, O God, may grow...and grow...and grow. Take our fears away and let the sunshine of Your love in Christ....brighten our lives...prepare us for the days and the weeks ahead. Wrestle with us, Lord, in the dark and hidden corners where fear and tension and uncertainty are lurking. Fill us with faith that can make a difference. In His name, we pray. Amen.

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PRAYER

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