

**No Fear**  
**Isaiah 43:1-7**  
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I love this passage of scripture. I love it because it is so full of hope and comfort, the promise that God is with us come what may. When Isaiah first spoke these words, they were particularly comforting for the Hebrews who were living through some pretty dark days...the way some people would describe these days in which we are living.

Again this year, the Rev. Pat Robertson, founder of the Christian Broadcasting Network and host of the 700 Club TV show, has made some predictions about the year ahead. For the past several years, his practice has been to spend a few days at the end of the year in a prayer retreat talking to God, and then early in the new year he reveals what God has told him will take place in the year ahead. Each year there seems to be a common thread that runs through all his predictions: something bad is about to happen.

- For 2014 he foresees a world in chaos;
- There will be an international financial crisis;
- Iran will develop a nuclear weapon.

In short, according to Pat Robertson's predictions, 2014 looks like it's going to be a pretty grim and frightening year.

The common theme that runs throughout his predictions in the past has been disaster. In 2006, for example, he predicted that there would be terrible storms in the Pacific northwest of the US, "probably something like a tsunami." In 2007 he predicted that there would be some sort of terrorist attack in the US bringing mass chaos and in which possibly millions of people would be killed.

I am not here this morning to take on Pat Robertson. I believe that he is sincere, and that he has the genuine conviction that he is speaking God's word. My purpose is not to challenge his picture of what the future holds. The fact is that we do live in a very violent and troubled world, and his predictions for 2014 may well be right.

The question that I want to raise this morning is this: What are we who are believers, people of faith, to do when we hear such frightening predictions as this? It often feels to me that the prevailing mood in our country is one of fear. How are we, who are believers, to live in such a fear-filled environment? How are people of faith to live in a world like ours?

There are people who would have us believe that God is the one who is behind all the havoc. Some people said that Hurricane Katrina was God's punishment on the evils of the city of New Orleans. Some said that the 9/11 attacks were God's punishment on our nation for our sinfulness. Some people seem to believe that God traffics in suffering and tragedy, and God is to be feared.

There was a church that I used to pass by in my daily commute to work, and the sign out front said, "Beware. God is present here." The sign seemed to be saying

that you'd better watch out when you're in God's presence, because you never know when God might decide to send down some lightning bolt of terror. God is to be feared. Beware!

The problem I have with all this is that it paints a picture of God that is in direct contradiction to the picture of God presented in the Bible. The God of the Bible is not about suffering and misery and pain. No, the God of the Bible is the One who loved the world so much that he sent his only son to bring about the salvation of the world.

If you read through the Bible from beginning to end, the word that God speaks over and over again is "Do NOT be afraid." From Genesis to Revelation the message is repeated over and over again: "do not be afraid."

I brought with me three pages of scripture verses—there are 45 on my list, and these are just a sampling—from practically every book of the Bible which speak that very message.

- God said to the patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph—"Do not be afraid."
- God told Moses when he was going to demand that Pharaoh let the Hebrew people go, "Do not be afraid."
- As the Hebrews were entering the Promised Land, God told them, "Do not be afraid."
- Both to individuals and to groups of people, through poets and prophets, the message was the same: "Do not be afraid."

And then in the New Testament you see it there too. Read the stories of the birth of Jesus:

- The angel appeared to Mary and said, "Do not be afraid."
- The messenger from God came to Joseph and said, "Do not be afraid."
- The angels came to the shepherds and sang out, "Do not be afraid."
- Time and again Jesus told his disciples, "Do not be afraid."

The picture of God that runs throughout the Bible is not that we should be afraid of God, but rather that God brings good news, peace, comfort, hope—the very opposite of fear.

This passage from Isaiah that I have read for this morning's Old Testament lesson is one of those "Do not be afraid" passages. And it was spoken at a time when fear was all around. The setting for this proclamation from God was this. It was some 600 years before Christ. The nations of Israel and Judah had been conquered, and the leading citizens had been shipped off to live in exile in Babylon. We think that 9/11 was a horrible thing that happened to our country, but what we felt after 9/11 can't begin to compare to what the Hebrews felt when they had been defeated by the armies of Babylon. Everything that they thought would stand forever—the Temple in Jerusalem, the impenetrable city walls, everything they held dear—was

gone. Now they are in Babylon, and you can almost see those Hebrew exiles looking longingly across the desert toward Jerusalem, hoping against hope that someday they might be able to go back home. But there was no chance of that. All around them was hopelessness, desperation...fear.

That was when Isaiah brought this prophesy from God.

Listen again to what God says to the people: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you." Did you hear that? Did you notice that there are no conditions on God's promise? God doesn't say, "I will redeem you if you shape up and start behaving right." God doesn't say, "I will redeem you if you start doing what I tell you." No, it's a statement with no strings attached: "I have redeemed you," says the Lord.

God goes on. "I have called you by name; you are mine." Called by name. Two of my grandchildren, Olivia and Nate, call me Chuck. And I have to tell you that I love it when they call my name. Called by name. The promise here is that God, the creator of the universe, the Lord of all worlds, knows each one of us by name, and calls us by name. God claims us: "you are mine."

Also, the verb tense here is perfect tense—I have redeemed you; I have called you by name. Perfect tense. That means it's done; it's complete; it's perfect. God has done it. Unconditionally, no strings attached. Therefore, we have nothing to fear.

As I've been thinking this week about the things that cause us to fear I've come to the conclusion is that fear is really a form of selfishness. Fear dwells on ME, and on what might happen to ME. It's fear that keeps me from being generous with the blessings I've been given because I've bought into the idea that it's mine, and it's up to me to make sure I'll have whatever I want. It is fear that keeps me from helping someone because you never know what the person might be up to. Fear cripples us and keeps us from boldly living our lives.

By contrast to fear—which focuses on me—faith focuses on God. Faith is the trust that in God's providence and love God is working out God's good purpose for the world. Even in those times when we cannot see it or understand it...even in those times we believe that God's will is being done.

I love the very first question in the Heidelberg Catechism, one of the confessions in our *Book of Confessions*. The question is this: What is your only comfort, in life and in death? And here's the answer:

That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.

At the center of this promise is God: we belong to God. We belonged to God in the past, and we will belong to God in the future. God made us; God claims us; God calls us by name; God has redeemed us. And because of that promise, we have nothing to fear.

I remember after 9/11 hearing people say, "Everything's changed. Nothing will ever be the same again." On one level I know that's true, but on a more fundamental level, it was not true at all. In the deepest sense, nothing changed. Before 9/11 we were God's people; after 9/11 we are still God's people. Before 9/11 our lives were lived under the sovereignty of God. After 9/11 that is still true. Before 9/11 we could affirm that in life and in death, we belong to God. After 9/11 we still know that it is true: Nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

So back to where we began this sermon and predictions for 2014: I don't pretend to know what is going to happen in this year ahead. But what I do know is this: whatever it is, God will be with us through it. Therefore, we need not be afraid.

Thank you, God.