



Foundational Essay

DO NOT FEAR

MARYANN MCKIBBEN DANA

INTRODUCTION


It's been said that the phrase *do not fear* appears 365 times in Scripture, one for each day of the year. I haven't done an audit of this claim, but I'm skeptical of such providential numbering. (And apparently we're free to be as frightened as we wish on leap days?) But there is no doubt that the reminder not to be afraid is one of the pivotal threads in the Bible, along with the commandment to love and the assertion that God is abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

Whether or not there are enough utterances of “do not be afraid” in Scripture to give us a unique reminder every day for a whole year, the idea remains that the command to put away fear is *comprehensive*; whatever each day brings, whatever trials befall us, we can remember that we are created for faith, not fear. Paul writes in Romans 8 that we did not receive a spirit of fear, and that nothing can separate us from God's love. And the writer of 1 John reminds us that perfect love casts out fear.


I have clung to these verses of assurance at countless times in my own life and ministry, even as I know it's rarely as simple as the verses make it sound. For one thing, fear has a valid physiological purpose. Fear can be a powerful and necessary messenger from the body. A small region in the brain sends signals to the nervous system to be on alert and sends blood away from the body's core and out to the limbs, the better to outrun a predator or fight off an attacker. As a woman, I have been in situations that felt unsafe for reasons I couldn't pinpoint intellectually. In retrospect, I've rarely regretted following through on my gut instinct to get myself to safety. My goal with my own children is to help them trust their inner knowing and not stick around an unsafe situation in the name of politeness.

At the same time, it's vital to accurately calibrate that inner knowing. Discomfort is necessary to growth, whether it's learning a new skill or bridging divides of race, theology, or culture. The fact that so many messengers and prophets had “be not afraid” on their lips should signal that the life of faith is not for the faint of heart. If you're not at least a little bit terrified, you're probably doing it wrong.

The scriptural command to “fear not” is also tricky because simply telling someone not to be afraid rarely works. As a parent, I've had the experience countless times of a kid padding down the hall and into my room



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in the middle of the night, convinced that there's a monster in the closet or that the dream that just awakened them is real. Sending them back to bed with a glass of water and the assurance not to be afraid rarely works. Fear is real enough, and visceral enough, that we usually can't be talked out of it. As a sleepy parent, much as I'd love to reassure children with a quick survey of the closet or explanation of how our subconscious works when dreaming, what usually works is to sit with them in their fear, to let them know that though the fear feels real, they are not alone.

Perhaps in the end, that's what the biblical command to be unafraid is really about, not to either expunge the feeling from our emotional menu or be frozen by it. As you will see, our practices come from this angle. What follows is not a four-step plan to eradicate fear, but to move faithfully through it:

- Tune In to God's Presence
- Trust God's Promises
- Take One Step at a Time
- Persevere

TUNE IN TO GOD'S PRESENCE

Author and researcher Brené Brown likes to ask guests on her *Unlocking Us* podcast a version of this question: "You have to be brave, but the fear is real; you can feel it in your throat. What's the very first thing you do?"¹

Guests respond in a variety of ways: "Breathe." "Call a friend." "Think of a brave friend and imagine what they'd do." "Just go for it." All good suggestions, but I propose that the biblical answer is to *listen*, a spiritual practice that has almost nothing to do with the ears and everything to do with the heart. We listen for God's guidance, or perhaps simply God's presence, so we know we're not alone in our fear. We listen to the messengers of God in Scripture: prophets who instruct and angels who herald good tidings and grand instructions in equal measure. And we listen to Jesus, God's beloved one. His life, ministry, teaching, death, and resurrection offer us both a pattern for living and the strength to carry out the work of discipleship. If "fear not" is a refrain that's threaded throughout Scripture, the invitation to listen is at least as prominent, and they often go hand in hand.

When the angel Gabriel visits Mary, a young woman engaged to Joseph, he hails her with the assurance that the Lord is with her (Luke 1:28). This perplexes her, and she ponders his greeting. "Do not be afraid, Mary," he reassures her, "for you have found favor with God" (Luke 1:30). What follows is the astonishing news that she has been chosen to be the God-bearer, the one to birth the Messiah, the Son of the Most High.

Part of listening well is curiosity. Mary exemplifies this with her question, "How can this be?" The angel's response has always struck me as more obscuring than clarifying, but it also includes a restatement of just how significant this birth will be: "the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. . . . For nothing will be impossible with God" (Luke 1:35b–37). It is answer enough for Mary. "How can this be" is a question for people who don't need absolute clarity to quell their fears, but instead want to enter further into God's mysterious work in the world.

Contrast this with poor Zechariah, a priest who entertains his own angelic visitor earlier in the same chapter. It's a remarkably similar encounter, right down to the "fear not." After the angel's *annunciation*—the



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1. brenebrown.com/podcast-show/unlocking-us



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announcement that he and his elderly wife will bear a son—Zechariah asks a question of his own, a question that so offends Gabriel that he renders Zechariah mute for the duration of the pregnancy. The question is “How will I know this?”

Preaching professor Anna Carter Florence homes in on Zechariah’s desire to *know*, to have the particulars figured out. In her book *Preaching as Testimony*, she asks, “Why should the angel take offense, when Zechariah is only asking for a sign to prove the angel’s words? That is exactly the point. There is no proof for an annunciation. When God breaks in, the only thing you can do is believe it or not. You cannot ask for a receipt of the transaction or a sign to convince the dubious. God does not offer to cover your backside.”²

When we’re afraid, it’s understandable to seek ironclad guarantees and mental certainties, like Zechariah. The kind of listening that helps address our fears is more like Mary’s: open, wondering, attending to God’s voice, which cuts through the desire to *know*. Perhaps Zechariah’s muteness is not a punishment but an enforced listening that finally allows him to put his fears to rest.

When we’re afraid, it can be hard to listen; the still small voice is drowned out by the objections and anxieties thundering in our ears. Prayer can help. When the words don’t come easily, we can fall back on the words of others, through prayer books, devotionals, and the Psalms. Or perhaps our fears grip us so tightly that words aren’t possible. Tending to our breathing can help, or focusing on our physical senses. A wise friend taught me this embodied practice: pay attention to five things we can see, four things we can hear, three things we can touch, two things we can smell, and one thing we can taste. (If one of these senses is unavailable to us, we may omit it and/or double up on one of the others.) This practice helps us tune into what’s around us, which is a form of spiritual listening.

TRUST GOD’S PROMISES

Mary ends her encounter with Gabriel with a full-throated assent to God’s call: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). What moves Mary from perplexed pondering to a wholehearted embrace of her role? It seems to be the reminder that God makes what seems impossible, possible. Mary moves forward with courage because she trusts God’s promises. But what are those promises? Isaiah 43:1–3a, 4a) spells them out as follows:

But now thus says the LORD,
 he who created you, O Jacob,
 he who formed you, O Israel:
 Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
 I have called you by name; you are mine.
 When you pass through the waters, I will be with you,
 and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
 when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
 and the flame shall not consume you.
 For I am the LORD your God,
 the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

 [Y]ou are precious in my sight
 and honored and I love you.

2. Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 115.

Isaiah is writing for a nation in exile, a people displaced from the land that had been promised and wondering whether God has forsaken them. As such, his assurances center on statements about God and God's activity in the world: God creates. God redeems. God calls by name. And God loves. As a result, the people are precious to God.

God's redemption and love are powerful forces, Isaiah argues; so powerful that they help us withstand flood and fire, figuratively speaking. When gripped by fear, we may wish to pin God down on the exact nature of these protective powers, to ask just how water-resistant and fire-retardant God's assurances are. Notably, Isaiah doesn't downplay the hazards; it's not an *if* but a *when*: "When you pass through waters . . . when you walk through fire." Isaiah normalizes the dangers but puts them in perspective; the dangers may be great, but God is greater. The life of faith is not an insurance policy, quite the opposite. The prophets of the Old Testament as well as Jesus himself continually call the people back to obedience and faithfulness to God, and that obedience comes at a cost.

The book of Revelation, like Isaiah, is addressed to a people experiencing upheaval. In Revelation's case, John is writing to a series of churches experiencing persecution for the faith. Revelation is known for its wild imagery and apocalyptic rhetoric (indeed, *apocalypse* and *revelation* are synonyms). But the book starts in a stabilizing place. Yes, John's vision of the Son of Man, a cosmic figure with eyes that burn and hands that hold seven stars, is otherworldly, but the words out of Christ's mouth are familiar and comforting: "Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last and the Living One. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever" (Revelation 1:17b–18a). Jesus was there in the beginning, and he will be there at the end. Or as the church near my home displayed on its sign recently, "Don't fear tomorrow; God is already there."

Some time ago, I led a workshop for a presbytery in Western Pennsylvania. Afterward I was chatting with one of the leaders there, who told a remarkable story. Many churches in that presbytery are quite small; some are right on the ragged edge of viability. This woman had pastored one congregation that had decreased in membership each year until it finally closed.

It's sad when a church closes, but this woman told an incredible story of creativity and generosity on the part of this congregation. The session decided early on not to hoard its resources to increase the church's longevity. Instead, they insisted on giving a significant portion of their income away every single year to alleviate suffering in the community. No longer bound by the anxiety of survival at all costs, they leaned into new ministries and initiatives. When the congregation finally closed its doors, they did so with the satisfaction that they had given their all, that they had lived abundantly right to the very end.

Embracing such reckless generosity requires a lot of faith. But not a faith that affirms that everything will turn out OK in the end; it's a faith that's so tuned into God that we face the future with excitement and purpose. This congregation walked right into flood and fire, knowing what it would cost, but assured that they would meet the living God there.

The church does not exist for its own sake—its purpose is to serve sacrificially. According to the *Book of Order* of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), "The Church is the body of Christ. . . . The Church is to be a community of faith, entrusting itself to God alone, *even at the risk of losing its life*."³

3. *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*, Part II, *Book of Order* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, 1999), F-1.0301.



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Trusting God's promises means giving our all, driven by faith, not fear. As the old question goes, "What would you do if you knew you could not fail?" I'd alter that to: What are we willing to risk for the sake of the gospel?

TAKE ONE STEP AT A TIME

The novelist E.L. Doctorow famously wrote, "Writing is like driving at night in the fog. You can only see as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way."⁴ Whether we're building a ministry or a life, we don't need to know how it's all going to turn out. Which is good, because we *can't* know. But by taking the next step, we'll get there.

I do a lot of teaching and writing about improvisation as a spiritual and life practice. One of the foundations of improvisation is the idea of *yes-and*. Yes-and is the cardinal rule of improv, and it means that when a scene partner says a line onstage, even if it isn't what you would have chosen, you go with it (that's the *yes*) and add your own contribution (the *and*). What's true onstage is true in life. When we yes-and, we don't always know where the journey will take us; in fact, we rarely know the final destination. But with each yes-and, we make our way. What's more, those small steps forward help calm our fears by giving us a sense of agency and purpose.

In his letter to the Corinthian church, Paul muses about love, and acknowledges that "we see only a reflection, as in a mirror. . . . Now I know only in part" (1 Corinthians 13:12). A time will come when we see fully and know fully, but in the meantime, only God gets to see the big picture. Scripture is full of people making their way forward, perhaps struggling with fear but with just enough faith for the next step. The Israelites cross through a divided Red Sea toward the Promised Land, not knowing that forty years of wilderness wandering would follow.

Gideon demonstrates this one-step-at-a-time mentality in Judges 6, when God taps him to lead the Israelites against the forces of Midian. Gideon is clearly skeptical whether he's the right man for the job, and whether God is going to make good on the promise to be with him. What follows is a series of encounters, tests, and incremental steps forward. First, Gideon makes an offering of meat and unleavened cakes. Then he builds an altar. Then he's brave enough to pull down an altar of Baal . . . but only under cover of darkness. Next comes a big move: a blast of the trumpet to summon troops to the cause. This dramatic step seems to shake him a bit, and he asks for one final sign from God: a fleece of wool, miraculously untouched by dew. That's a long buildup to chapter 7, in which Gideon is finally ready to step into his full military leadership of troops to defeat the Midianites. That battle is a whole episodic journey in itself.

Moving to the New Testament, Mary says, "Here am I, . . . let it be with me" (Luke 1:38) without a roadmap for what she is saying yes to. Disciples drop their nets to follow Jesus and walk by his side day in and day out, not knowing the journey would take them through betrayal, abandonment, death, and new life.

I think back to the beginning of the COVID pandemic, when we thought we'd lock down for a few weeks, flatten the curve, and be done with it. We had no idea what was ahead. We often think we can assuage our fears if only we have enough information, but when it comes to faithful discipleship, the ignorance may be a mercy; if we know how hard it will be, we might never start.

4. As quoted in Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), 18.



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In her book *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going*, Susan Beaumont writes about times of transition and threshold, known as *liminality*. She doesn't provide a roadmap for these in-between moments. Instead she lifts up a series of practices, conversations, and areas of focus. What questions should we ask ourselves? What do we need to be paying attention to?

A favorite passage in the book deals with "proximate purpose," a term coined by organizational consultant Gil Rendle. In Beaumont's words: "Proximate purpose [is] the next appropriate piece of work. . . . A proximate purpose will encourage people to walk to the end of the beam of light cast by the flashlight they are holding, in order to cast the beam just a little further, to see an additional fragment of the beam ahead."⁵

Beaumont and Rendle make a distinction between *proximate* purpose and *aspirational* purpose: "In liminal seasons, when we can't visualize our destination, proximate purpose is more useful than aspirational purpose. Clarity of focus about our next few steps is more important than a fuzzy picture of an unrecognizable destination."⁶ What Beaumont is describing is the next right thing, and it's often the best way forward, especially in times of fear.

PERSEVERE

Novelist and YouTuber John Green talks about rooming with a Kuwaiti man named Hassan during the first Gulf War. They were watching CNN one night when the camera panned to a scene of devastation, including a bombed-out wall tagged with graffiti in Arabic. The reporter made some banal statement about the anger and despair of the people there, and Hassan burst out laughing. John asked him what it said. "Happy Birthday, despite the circumstances."⁷

Green has used this story as an example of how we make assumptions about people we don't understand, and that the world is much more complex than we realize. Lately he's been using it as an example of determination and fierce joy amidst everything. This is the kind of perseverance to which we are called as people of faith, a steadfastness *despite*: despite war and division, despite a planet on fire, despite the continued scourge of racism and white supremacy.

The Presbyterian Church's Brief Statement of Faith acknowledges this reality: "In a broken and fearful world, the Spirit gives us courage." The Spirit doesn't magically heal the brokenness or quell the anxiety. Instead, the Spirit gifts us with courage. To do what? "To pray without ceasing, to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior, to unmask idolatries in Church and culture, to hear the voices of peoples long silenced, and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace."⁸ It's an ambitious to-do list, and one we'll never complete. Yet still we must persist.

5. Susan Beaumont, *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going: Leading in a Liminal Season* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019), 126.
6. Beaumont, 126.
7. John Green, "Happy Graduation, despite the Circumstances," *The Speech Blog*, May 11, 2013, thespeechblog.wordpress.com/2013/06/01/happy-graduation-despite-the-circumstances-john-green-05-11-13.
8. *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*, Part 1, *Book of Confessions* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church [U.S.A.], 1999), 10.4.



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Some five thousand years ago, a group of people in present-day Ireland took on a monumental project: a tomb one acre across, built with painstaking precision, especially given the technology available at the time. On precisely one day each year—the day of the winter solstice—the sunlight shines through a narrow opening at just the right angle to illumine a sixty-foot corridor where ancient bones and ashes were laid to rest. It’s a feat of engineering for a pre-modern people, an act of beauty and devotion. Even today, pilgrims visit Newgrange on the solstice, and though it’s rare for the weather to be sunny enough to activate that perfectly aligned shaft of light, people feel the power of the place.

According to the Newgrange website, the Stone Age farmers who built Newgrange sought to mark the beginning of the new year. “In addition, it may have served as a powerful symbol of the victory of life over death.”⁹ Perhaps. But the most powerful symbolism for me lies in how long it took. Archaeologists believe the project took decades, and given that life expectancy was short, this was a task passed down from generation to generation. They imagined something no one had ever seen before, that barely seemed possible. And together, over time, they did it.


As I consider the generation-level work of Newgrange, and the generation-level work of our time, I remember the writer of the book of Hebrews. After offering a veritable who’s who of the biblical faithful, the author writes, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses . . . let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith” (Hebrews 12:1–2). The Greek word for *perseverance* is also translated “patience.” It’s fitting that these two English words would be connected. Patience without perseverance can be timid and meek, but perseverance without patience can quickly burn out or revert to fear when things don’t change quickly enough. The right amount of both provides some irresistible fuel. The night Jesus was born, the shepherds cowered in fear at the angels’ annunciation. By the end of the visit, they are praising God for the good news that has been revealed to them, and they *keep* praising God, persevering in sharing the good news as they return to life as usual, forever changed.

Thanks be to God, we don’t go alone into our patient, persevering work. Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, leads the way. But the faithful witnesses cloud around us as well, in even greater numbers than when the writer of Hebrews penned that epistle. They surround us and inspire us and sing with us the refrain from the hymn of old: *Grant us wisdom. Grant us courage.*

ABOUT THE WRITER

MaryAnn McKibben Dana is a writer, speaker, pastor, and ministry coach living in Reston, Virginia. She is author of *Hope: A User’s Manual*; *God, Improv, and the Art of Living*; and *Sabbath in the Suburbs*. She was featured on PBS’s *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly* for her work on Sabbath and was recognized by the Presbyterian Writers Guild with the 2015–2016 David Steele Distinguished Writer Award. She is a parish associate at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Herndon, Virginia, and adjunct faculty at the George Washington University School of Medicine, working alongside physician mentors to teach clinical skills, interviewing, and patient coaching and care.

9. “Newgrange—World Heritage Site,” newgrange.com.



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