

# THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

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## Today's Bible reading

*Isaiah 43:1-8 ("Restoration and Protection Promised")*

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 Saviour.

I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.

Because you are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you,

I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life.

Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you;

I will say to the north, 'Give them up', and to the south, 'Do not withhold;

bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth—

everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.'

Bring forth the people who are blind, yet have eyes, who are deaf, yet have ears!  
Amen. (NRSV)

## Today's hymns

*Let's sing to the Lord* (CH: 126)

*Who would true valour see* (CH: 535)

*The Lord of heaven confess* (CH: 104)

*Christ's is the world in which we move* (CH: 724)

*Love divine, all loves excelling* (CH: 519)

**B**ack in 1988 the Church of Scotland published a collection of hymns entitled, *Songs of God's People*, which John Bell said at the time was intended to be, "a tribute to the diversity of the Church". Unlike previous hymnaries, "SOGP" (as it became known) went out of its way to look to the world Church to find new ways of praising God in the late 20th century. And, of course, that approach has continued ever since, with our current purple hymn book delighting in a thoroughly global approach to praise. And that is very good indeed.

One of the songs which *Songs of God's People* brought to people's attention was Gerard Markland's, "Do not be afraid". This is a beautiful musical meditation from the Roman Catholic folk hymn tradition which, since entering our hymn books, has become a firm favourite for many. It is based on today's Bible passage, and the tune certainly has the power to spring into our heads whenever Isaiah 43 is read:

*Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.*

I have said before in church (as recently as last year) that the line, "Do not fear" is one which is found more than 500 times across Scripture. You can do an internet search and see for yourself all the varied settings in which troubled people are told very simply not to be afraid. And the great thing is that these words, "Do not be afraid", are not merely offered as some kind of empty re-assurance. They are proclaimed as a crucially important message sent from heaven to earth, almost as though we are meant to realise that *this is what the whole thing is all about*.

Do not fear: from God's leading of those early people of faith, on to the wise writers of histories and poetry, then the prophets (as here, with Isaiah); later the New Testament with Jesus, followed by the early Church - there were certainly good reasons to fear across all the troubled biblical centuries, yet still that message turns up: Do not fear. It's OK. Have confidence. God is close by.

Yet, as we know only too well in this third decade of the 21st century, it is very, very hard to throw off our fears. Whether we are thinking about climate catastrophe, the poverty gap, appalling health issues, rocketing prices, national debt, arms proliferation, global politics, brutal dictators, helpless refugees or whatever it is that is burdening you right now (whether in your great big world or in your tiny wee family) being afraid would appear to be very much part of who we are.

Not so, says the prophet Isaiah. And why not? Because *God has redeemed you*. He has taken the ticket, walked into the pawn shop, paid the price and carried you home. That's not something which is hinted at or stated or even promised. It has happened already because this God is the God of true and unrelenting Love. And that is just what Love does. So we are free to rejoice in our salvation. Free indeed.

*Yes, but then again ...*

... we look around us and we find so, so many things that are fundamentally scary. And so we find ourselves despairing at the state of our world - so many heartbreaks seemingly happening all at once. No wonder then that Professor Walter Brueggemann says living a life that is unafraid is "an odd vocation". If fear is so much part of the society in which we live, then to go the other way and embrace a kind of faithful courage is at best countercultural and at worst a laughable form of wishful thinking. Yet could it be that Brueggemann has a point, and a very good point at that? For those who place their trust in God, who genuinely seek to live their lives close to the divine, this "odd vocation" of fearlessness is one which does stand up to scrutiny. Seriously unafraid. Deliberately unafraid. Intentionally unafraid. Determinedly unafraid in a ghastly world of big, bad fears: is that us?

The believer is someone who is (or who can be) more than somewhat different from those around them, not on account of any personal quality, but on account of the grace of God which seeks to soak into the heart, the soul, the mind, the being of anyone who travels through life in the company of the Holy Spirit.

“... *what the Spirit does is visit our lives*”, says Brueggemann, “our persons, our bodies, our imagination, our money—with *the freedom of God*, so that we are unafraid in the world, able to live differently, not needing to control, not needing to dominate, not needing to accumulate, not driven by anxiety.”

And by way of example he sends us off to the New Testament and the Book of Acts. Why Acts? Because the people in that book show us what happens when the Spirit came knocking on their lives. These ordinary 1st century folk felt compelled to risk their personal freedom and even to risk the possibility of martyrdom, to stand up for the Good News of Christ. They went where God led them, in so doing turning the world “upside down” (Acts 17.6).

What, you might wonder, does such an upside down world look like? According to Walter Brueggemann it is a world whose standards are so completely at odds with what the world at large holds dear. The world at large, after all, is a place where fear walks tall with frightened folk ensnared and enslaved. These are defensive people whose security is found very close to hearth and home: a place of personal protection where doors can be locked and windows shut to keep out the chill of vulnerability or threat.

But if Brueggemann is to be believed in his assessment of our condition, there are others - the “unafraid” believers - whose great task in life is to make their world more whole, and more *holy*. What are these folk like? Here is what he says:

- ✦ *The unafraid are open to the neighbor, while the frightened are defending themselves from the neighbor.*
- ✦ *The unafraid are generous in the community, while the frightened, in their anxiety, must keep and store and accumulate, to make themselves safe.*
- ✦ *The unafraid commit acts of compassion and mercy, while the frightened do not notice those in need.*
- ✦ *The unafraid are committed to justice for the weak and the poor, while the frightened see them only as threats.*
- ✦ *The unafraid pray in the morning, care through the day, and rejoice at night in thanks and praise, while the frightened are endlessly restless and dissatisfied.*

And if this biblical analysis of God-given courage in the face of fear seems woefully unrealistic for the likes of us (and surely it will!) then recall how often in Scripture we read stories of those whose initial response to God was one of, “Who? ... Me???” These were “pre-empowerment people” who had yet to be convinced that they might have some vague sense of calling to go beyond themselves and their safety zones. We are pointed to the foundational stories of Abram and Sarai, ... of Isaac ... of Jacob ... of Joseph. (And these names just from the first few chapters of our Bibles.) When empowerment came from on high, these people became *the unafraid*.

Fear is an inevitable part - and a big part - of any life. Just ask Jesus, who knew fear of the most pervasive and terrifying variety. But no matter how real our fears may be, no matter how much they might grow in time to come, when we live in God we will know within our very selves that faith is stronger than fear.

May we be emboldened, “as those who know that they are called”. Amen.

## Praying for others

Lord God,  
we pray for the people of the earth which you have made;  
surely you have made all people who have ever lived and all who live now.  
We pray for the people of Ukraine who are suffering in this time from war and  
many other terrible difficulties. We remember those who have fled their homes  
and are now refugees who do not know where they may live in peace.  
Many are walking through the waters;  
we pray that you will uphold them that they may not sink.  
Many are surrounded by the fires;  
we pray that you will shield them from the flames of terror.  
Many are lonely and strangers in exile;  
we pray that they may find hands of friendship so they do not despair.  
In all our perplexities and troubles, Lord, help us never to despair of your love.  
May we play some small part in bringing help and comfort  
to the people of the earth who are in such desperate need.  
Help us to remember, Lord, that we are yours and we are always in your love. In  
Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.

## And finally ...

*Abigail Morrison considers ingenuity and selflessness:*

I have now finished watching *Surgeons: Life on the Edge* on catch-up. It really was a thought-provoking series. I eagerly await the next one. I constantly found myself thinking, "how did someone think of that?" So often an operation involved some novel, and sometimes quite odd, technology or treatment. I wondered what had put it into the mind of some surgeon or researcher in the first place. Who, for example, first thought, "I know what I'll do, I'll grow some new blood vessels to implant into humans"? Having thought of it then they or, more likely, several folk, had to think about how to do it. As far as I can recall it involves making a scaffold of some inert stuff that one then inserts special cells into. The cells then grow to fill the scaffold and - ta da! - you have a replacement bit of aorta or whatever. The creativity required is humbling but so is the patience to try this over and over and over again until you finally get something that works.

The other part of this, not shown in the series, is the countless people who volunteer to try out new treatments, with no guarantee of success. In fact, if you are one of the first people to try a new technological treatment you are quite likely to find it fails. These courageous people, often with death close at hand, are willing to be guinea pigs in order to help others, strangers to themselves, even if it may cost them a few extra weeks of life. Without their selflessness few new treatments could be developed.

Ingenuity and selflessness - two of humankind's greatest characteristics.