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**Sunday 13 August 2023 to Sunday 20 August 2023**

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Sunday 13 August 2023

**Don’t be afraid**

by Tatiana Overduin

***But Jesus immediately said to them: ‘Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid’ (Matthew 14:27).***

Read Matthew 14:22–33

We live in precarious times. There is much that can cause fear. Wars and rumours of wars. Many forms of global political uncertainty and hostility. Financial pressures, such as rising food and living prices. Housing insecurities for many Australians. And then our own personal daily challenges. And yet, in Australia, our needs are considered largely met. We might ask, ‘Is this really a time in history that is worse than any other previous time?’

What impacted me most in today’s Scripture text were Jesus’ words, ‘Don’t be afraid’, and yet, as listed above, many reasons could provoke anxiety or fear within us. Researching how many times the statement to not fear is expressed throughout the Bible, the first answer I googled was 365 times. Wow! We are consoled 365 times by our loving God, saying we need not be afraid. That’s once for each and every day of the year! Whether or not this statistic can be authenticated (whether this statement is actually offered 365 times – as some biblical scholars dispute) actually becomes irrelevant at this point because knowing that this is the Lord’s promise to us, even once, makes this word very relevant!

Knowing that we can arise every day and not be afraid, just like the disciples in the boat, we can stand assured together with them and be unafraid. So let us daily turn not to our own understanding but instead trust in his promises. Let us continue to gather in worship of our Triune God with praise and thanksgiving. May we call to him in prayer, assured of our blessing. May we believe in his life-saving sacrifice offered up for us, once and for all, on the cross. May our hearts and minds receive the comfort of these words today and every day – these words offered to us by Christ himself, written for our consolation and reiterated many times throughout the Bible: ‘Don’t be afraid’, ‘ ... have no fear’, ‘… do not be alarmed’, ‘Take courage’. So, allow the ‘stormy winds’ to be stilled in your life. Trust and believe in his promise of peace: a peace that the world simply can never give. Might you share this message of hope with others?

***Lord, thank you for telling us we can take courage when confronted with life’s difficulties. Help us trust in you and not our own understanding. Reassure us daily to build our trust through the devotion of your holy word, and give us the gift of peace through your comforting promise that we need not be afraid. Amen.***

*Tatiana is married to Jim, and they live in Largs North, a seaside location in Adelaide. They have two adult children and six grandchildren, who are a wonderful blessing to them both. Tatiana teaches full-time as an English, history and religion teacher; she gained a Bachelor of Arts in Theology from Australian Lutheran College in 1996, and in her spare time, she enjoys knitting, gardening, singing for church, writing and swimming. Her home congregation is Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Adelaide.*

Monday 14 August 2023

**Free from concern**

by Tatiana Overduin

***I would like you to be free from concern (1 Corinthians 7:32a).***

Read 1 Corinthians 7:32–40

In this text, St Paul addresses the union of marriage between husbands and wives: with a focus, as written in verse 33, on being overly ‘concerned about the affairs of this world’*.* Overarching his point is the ability to be ‘free to serve’ (see also 1 Peter 4:10,11), which is why Paul highlights the option of remaining single or unmarried, including being widowed. However, St Paul also makes it clear this is not the Lord’s command.

Being married is serving the Lord, is it not? In serving one's spouse and children, we serve the Lord in familial love. Therefore, we can establish that Paul’s aim here is that believers have freedom from the cares and worries of this life when the pressures come, and that is why he recommends that people stay single. We see this reiterated in the previous verse 29 of the same chapter in Corinthians, stating that ‘those who are married should live as if they were not’, and that most certainly doesn’t mean we ignore or abandon our marriage, spouse and family.

Whether married or not, the question, then, that we all could ask ourselves could be: ‘How might I give more time for the Lord’s service?’ There are many distractions in life, and although we need to recuperate from the busyness of everyday life, how might we create more time to serve our gracious God by serving others? We could reflect on whether we are making the time for daily Bible reading, reflection and prayer. We might reflect on whether there is a need to visit or call on a neighbour in need. Perhaps there is an opportunity to join with other Christians, grow a Bible study group, or there may be other ways to assist in church volunteer work. There are so many opportunities to serve our gracious God, all unique to our own circumstances. Today you may wish to reflect on how you might be able to increase your service to our Triune God in your life in gratitude for his gifts of love to you. Today you might ask yourself: How does God provide me ways to offer his message of salvation to others?

***Dear Father God, help us to reflect on the ways we can be of service to you. You have created us to have compassion for others, and you call us to share Jesus’ message of forgiveness for others, especially with young people and those who have lost hope in life. We seek the Holy Spirit to enable us to complete the work you have called us to do. In your holy name, we pray. Amen.***

Tuesday 15 August 2023

**I will not cause them to fall**

by Tatiana Overduin

***Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall (1 Corinthians 8:13).***

Read 1 Corinthians 7:32–40

Would you give something up if it caused another to stumble in their faith? Today’s reading is interesting when we consider it in our ‘me-focused’ generation. As a teacher of teens, I often hear statements that echo blatant selfishness. ‘I haven’t done anything wrong’; ‘It wasn’t my fault’; ‘I can do whatever I like!’ – sentiments that overtly reflect a lack of empathy for others. However, as young people grow into maturity and test the moral boundaries of life, it is to be expected that they will question their identity, which will inevitably shape their questioning regarding what they like and dislike. As Christian adult role models, then, our aim is to guide our young ones to consider others so they not only look to fulfilling their own needs but also be considerate of others – because empathic, caring young people grow into empathic, caring adults. The message of the Bible is to consider the needs of others, as the Philippians text teaches us all to:

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others (Philippians 2:3,4).

It's a tall order, though, isn’t it? Born into sin, we innately find it difficult to put others' needs before our own. We can only achieve this loving duty when we ask for God’s help. More than ever, in our modern social climate, there are so many distractions and influences that do not even consider the effect that one’s own actions might have on another. Behaviours heralding increasing greed, selfishness and utter individuality, which equates to what many identify as a ‘me’ generation, seem only to be escalating.

Today’s reading paints such a refreshingly different picture. Let us consider for a brief moment what Jesus has done for us! He gave his life so we can live as free people: free to love and serve our brothers and sisters. We have been freed from the bondage of sin, guilt and shame. We are free to go that extra mile when we might be feeling tired or discouraged. We are free to give up that pet sin that might cause us to be a stumbling block for others, therefore, witnessing Christ working in us. All is possible with God’s help (Matthew 19:26)! We just need to ask him.

***God of love and truth, we pray that you empower us to seek your ways – the perfect way. Help us reflect on how our lives might be a stumbling block for others: please reveal these ways to us. Lord, have mercy. Amen.***

Wednesday 16 August 2023

**Spiritual seed**

by Tatiana Overduin

***Whoever plows should plow in hope and whoever threshes should thresh in hope of a share in the crop (1 Corinthians 9:10b).***

Read 1 Corinthians 9:1–15

Today's reading echoes the previous texts for this week: encouragement to have faith in the freedom that Christ offers us, the call to serve others and, in yesterday’s reading, the reminder of humility to consider others better than ourselves.

I enjoy having a lovely garden, and really I like the Edna Walling approach: wild and rambling. Some areas of my garden are neat and tidy, yet other areas remain randomly interspersed with herbs and vegetables among the flowers. I’m very interested in companion planting – plants that complement other plants, like planting garlic bulbs under roses. I have a curious interest in herbs for tea, medicine, and textile dyeing.

One area of gardening I’m not very good at is growing plants from seed. Cuttings? Sure, but seeds often fail me. One Scripture verse that has meant much to me is Luke 13:19, ‘Faith is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds perched in its branches’.

Now, of course, today’s devotion is not about growing actual trees or vegetables, herbs or flowers. It’s about God’s spiritual garden of faith, and we can read many analogies and parables in the Bible about this topic. In today’s reading, St Paul wants to see the fruit of the Corinthian believers and share in the harvest of their faith. We read earlier in 1 Corinthians, where he refers to his part of the spiritual gardening process, and we learn when God takes over. ‘I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth’ (1 Corinthians 3:6,7). Later, in Galatians 5:22,23, Paul seeks to witness and experience the fruit of the Spirit at work among them.

We, too, are called, together with St Paul, to be ‘part of the spiritual seed-sowing process’ through our faith, testimony and witness. This seed is different, though: ‘for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God’ (1 Peter 1:23)*.* Will you join me in some gardening?

***Holy God, creator of all things in heaven and on earth, help us to become better gardeners, sowing spiritual seed in your garden of love. We pray that we can draw on your word of truth to share your message of hope with others. May we continually seek to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit and work at cultivating your garden by sowing the seed of your word. In Jesus' name, Amen.***

Thursday 17 August 2023

**Preach the gospel**

by Tatiana Overduin

***I do all this for the sake of the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:23a).***

Read 1 Corinthians 9:16–27

‘Preach the gospel …’, ‘be compelled to preach ...’, ‘preach the gospel’ (1 Corinthians 9:16–18).

Today, the text presents a powerful witness to St Paul’s commitment to preaching the gospel message of Jesus Christ so that ‘by all possible means [he] might save some …’ (verse 22). And not with ‘boasting’ (verse 16), nor ‘voluntarily’ (verse 17), but rather ‘free of charge’ and with ‘no rights’ (verse 18), Paul states that he becomes as ‘a slave to everyone … like a Jew … like one under the law … like one not under the law … and even becoming weak’ (verses 19–23) all for the sake of the gospel (verse 23). Paul is dedicated.

What a challenging text to contemplate. What becomes apparent is how Paul champions the proclamation of the gospel message to whoever necessary. What also becomes clear is how often I inadequately disappoint and, time and again, shy away into my own little world. How many times have I had the opportunity to proclaim God’s truth, yet my lips have remained sealed? I have been hurt before (as you, too, no doubt, have experienced at some point in your life) when stating a Bible text, only to be shut down by others. In 2 Corinthians 2:16, we are reminded that ‘To those who are perishing, we are a dreadful smell of death and doom’. The gospel truth doesn’t always smell so pretty, like garlic among roses! And St Paul knew and experienced the outcome of this ‘stench’ in his own life: experiencing beatings, imprisonment, and finally, martyrdom for the sake of Jesus’ gospel.

‘But to those who are being saved, we are a life-giving perfume’ (2 Corinthians 2:17). So, how do we know when the gospel message will not get accepted into the heart of another? Who are we to determine when the Holy Spirit will call another through God’s word? We, therefore, look for the opportunity to be ready to attest to God’s work in our lives. We pray that we practise what we preach and join in with all the saints to share in the promised blessing of eternal life. In verse 27, we read, ‘I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize’. Then let us pray that we continue to grow in faith and be worthy of receiving and sharing the gospel truth – the prized message of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who paid the ultimate price for the salvation of the world.

***O Triune God, have mercy on us and forgive us when we fear and fail to testify to your truth and, therefore, miss opportunities that you provide to bring others to your truth. Help us and give us the resilience to run the race, reach the prize, and one day wear the crown of everlasting life, all for the sake of the gospel. May we humbly accept the task you present to us to share your gospel message with others. In your holy name, we pray. Amen.***

Friday 18 August 2023

**In the cloud**

by Tatiana Overduin

***God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear (1 Corinthians 10:13a).***

Read 1 Corinthians 10:1–13

In modern times, we know about the cloud. It’s where all our personal information is stored. Everything we’ve searched, googled, or inquired into, documents we’ve saved: It would appear that nothing about our identity is private anymore. Yet technology, as amazing as it is, will never be able to emulate the omnipotence and omnipresence of our Creator God. Absolutely nothing in all of creation is hidden in any cloud from God’s sight. We read in today’s reading of another cloud: God’s cloud, which continues to guide and protect us. It is the same cloud that shielded Moses and the Israelites. It is a cloud that God has provided – one that will come in the clouds and always reigns far superior: Jesus Christ (Revelation 1:7).

In our troubled world, we see chaos and suffering. The media has made it all too accessible, and for many of us, our hearts are grieved by the affliction that others endure in this world. Yet we live protected as if living within a cloud. When we take up the armour of God daily, we can feel assured that Jesus walks beside us: our champion who has defeated the enemy. Though tempted to doubt, fear and live troubled by the many cares of this world, we can stand assured that our Saviour, Jesus Christ, is with us through all the battles that life throws us.

***Loving Creator God, speak to us daily through your holy word, so we can ponder your wonderful gift and hear your calling without doubt, temptation or fear. Let us hear and listen to your voice and mind our thoughts, feelings and actions so we can respond in love to you and our neighbours through the reading and meditation of your word. Teach us to believe in your promises, so we need not be ashamed but grow in faith to stand atoned before you. Amen.***

Saturday 19 August 2023

**Shine on us**

by Tatiana Overduin

***May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine on us (Psalm 67:1).***

Read Psalm 67

When we think about God’s face shining on us, what do we think about? Is it like the gentle warmth of the sun on a winter’s day? Or perhaps it’s like a light that surrounds and protects us like a shield? But if we seek the warmth of the sun or the light of a new day, we need to step into that warmth and light; we cannot remain in a dark place.

God’s word, who is Jesus, is that warmth; he is that light. In John 8:12, Jesus speaks to the people, saying, ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life’. Jesus is the only source of the gospel truth that humanity longs to shine upon us.

In medieval manuscripts, the gospels were produced with illumination, using gold and silver in the text and images. The highly trained monks, or skilled illuminators, saw the light that shone from the gospel message and meticulously aimed to reproduce it. The ancient illuminated texts from Ethiopia, Greece or Lindisfarne are remarkably beautiful. But only in Jesus will we ever truly experience the eternal illuminating light of truth. And we daily seek this truth filled with light. The reason we ask God to shine on us is not simply so that we are blessed and then enjoy a carefree, comfortable life here on earth but so that we also serve others through the blessing we have received and come into that light when we reach our eternal home. The assurance of this promise of salvation is written in verse two of today’s psalm, ‘your salvation among all nations'. It is the salvation of Jesus, who is the message of the cross.

‘May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine on us,so that your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations. May the peoples praise you, God; may all the peoples praise you … May God bless us still, so that all the ends of the earth will fear him.’

***God of illuminating light and love, thank you for your holy word. Thank you for providing us with the richness that the Book of Psalms offers – everything to fill our lives with faith and love towards you and others. May our lives shine with a light that is a witness to your gospel truth in this dark world. In Jesus' holy name, Amen.***

Sunday 20 August 2023

**Passing on the gospel**

by Pastor Mathew Ker

***Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, ‘Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon’ (Matthew 15:22).***

Read Matthew 15:(10–20) 21–28

While I got baptised as a baby, I had no significant Christian influence in my upbringing.  There were a couple of times when I had some brief exposure to church, but it was never encouraged in my home growing up.

In my late 20s, I was serving in the army with a young family of my own. One of my colleagues shared the hope he had in Jesus with me. The timing was right, and I was hungry to learn more about Jesus and how he could satisfy a hunger I never really understood.

As we read of the Canaanite woman, her faith in Jesus is extraordinary. So often, we crave the whole meal, with trimmings and dessert, but this unnamed woman was satisfied with the crumbs that fell from the table. In doing so, she asked not for herself but for her daughter to be healed.

What stands behind her request is that someone else – who never appears in the story – told this caring mum that Jesus was someone she could put her trust in. Jesus has the power to heal and save. Go and see him for what you most need.

Jesus will always be the hero of this story, and the faithful woman who had the courage to ask him for help will be the one through whom her daughter’s needs were brought to him. But behind all the characters is the one who shared the good news with a neighbour.

It’s unlikely my army friend could have anticipated the start of a journey that led to my serving as a parish pastor. We don’t know the circumstances behind the person who shared their faith with the Canaanite woman, but it led to a young girl getting healed and a story that has encouraged countless people.

You may never understand how sharing the good news of Jesus Christ’s saving grace will impact the lives of others.  You can be confident that God’s Word goes out and does not return empty but achieves the purpose for which he sends it.

***Heavenly Father, thank you for those who have shared the hope they have in Jesus Christ. Give me the courage to share what has already been given to me. Amen.***

*Mathew is married to Sonja, and they are in the process of moving from the Barossa Valley in South Australia to Tabor in Western Victoria. They are blessed to have two adult sons, one married, but, as yet, no grandchildren. Mathew enjoys gardening, cycling, writing letters, and sharing adventures with Sonja.*