

January 22, 1961, Durham, NC William C. Bennett Trinity Ave Presbyterian Church
NERVOUS THINGS JESUS NEVER SAID

“Fear not; everything will turn out all right.”

When I was in seminary – a retired professor, diminutive in stature, scarcely five feet tall, came back to preach on a Palm Sunday. When he sat down in the chancel of the chapel, he disappeared from sight behind the greenery and we sort of forgot about him. Then suddenly at the time of the sermon – a little hand pushed aside the palm branches – a small head peeked over the pulpit – and with a wee, piping voice he announced his text – “Fear not. It is I!”

The students were hard put to suppress giggles – for that good little old man was certainly nothing to fear.

Quite often – I think – you and I go around like little prophets of peace telling people – “Fear not” – and if they ask “Why not?” – We burble soothingly “Because there’s really nothing to fear.” We give the guilty (whose consciences are killing them) – the sick (who cry in pain) – those knocked flat on their faces by tragedy – those in peril of life and limb – the same old patent formula, “Now don’t you worry – don’t you worry a-tall” and if they are impertinent enough to demand, “Why shouldn’t I?” – We give the stock reply – “everything will turn out all right. Just you wait and see.”

So they wait – and some wait fifteen minutes and some take fifty years to see that nothing ever turns out all right (most things turn out our poorly, right?) – and a lot of things turn out all wrong. They despise our facile advice but unblushingly pass it on to the next troubled person to come along. “Fear not, don’t worry, everything will turn out all right.”

Of course – Jesus often said to his little flock of nervous students, “Fear not” – he had to say it often because any little rough going like being caught in the act of sin or in a storm at sea – or in the scorn of high Pharisee society – shook them up easily – and they needed to conquer panic before they could see their problem clearly enough to settle them. In the same way – we need to get over our fright – before we can develop any insight into the situation that scares us – we too need some serenity in order to think sensibly. Our Lord often says to us, easily nervous, skittish -- “Fear not” –

But if we are inquisitive enough to ask Him, “Why not?” He never replies, “Because there is nothing to fear.” For, of course, there is! Indeed, most of the time – in this life – the
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words are on fire and we ought to be afraid. What Pascal called “virtuous fear” is like a fire alarm – fear is a ringing to warn us of real danger. Real sin – real suffering – sinister facts – that will torment us, burn the life out of us if not attended to. But you can’t fight a fire by just sitting down listening to the alarm ring as though it were a concert – turn the thing off or forget it and start battling the blaze. So fear is an alarm not meant to be listened to like a concert (what good does it do to sit around and listen to your nerves jangle and your ears ring in panic?) Once fear has aroused you to some real problem – it’s served its purpose – so forget the alarm, turn it off – “Fear not” any further – but for goodness sake start the fight to put out whatever is on fire, whatever is causing you to burn, to be miserable. That is, ask God to forgive your sin – see your physician for your illness, seek counsel, and do something, anything. Even the largest fears – are attempting, often vainly, to make us wake up and attend to some burning problem. “Fear not! Because there’s nothing to fear?” Ridiculous? If you’re afraid –there’s something there that needs attention. Even if what you think you are afraid of is not what you are actually afraid of. As old Henry Ward Beecher used to say, “God planted fear in the soul as truly as he planted love or courage ... It is a kind of bell ... the soul’s signal for rallying.” And one is stupid to neglect an alarm bell. So, fear has a good and godly purpose – all power of positive thinkers to the contrary. As Harry Emerson Fosdick wrote, “One of the strange phenomena of the last century is the spectacle of religion dropping the appeal to fear while other human interests have picked it up.”

And, if Jesus Christ never said, “Fear not because there is nothing to fear” – neither did he say to his disciples, “Fear not, for everything will turn out all right” – automatically, like a clock. Things – no matter how painful or difficult – or frightening they are will take care of themselves? You just sit back and wait -- ?

No, the purpose of fear is not to inform us that there is a fire – but not to worry about getting up – for the fire will go out all by itself. Rather – its purpose is to call us to action – to get up and do something – to do all we can – to meet the situation at hand – meet it head on – to see it for what it is and settle it as we are able – with God’s help.

But when St. Paul said, “All things work together for good to them that love God” – he did not mean “everything will turn out all right” or “everything is for the best if you are a believer.” There is too much evidence against that. All things just do not work whether you love

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God or not, but that's not what Paul said. Other translations make Paul's meaning much clearer.

The RSV says, "In everything God works (not things work) for good with those who love him."
_____ translates "those who love God ... have his aid in everything." Goodspeed renders it,
"God, Himself, works with those who love him." And C.H. Dodd's translation is probably the
best, "God cooperates in all thing for good."

This makes sense and is great reassurance – it affirms that even if things turn out all
wrong – God is present to sustain us – in any situation. No matter how bad – we have his love
and help in everything if we love and trust him – if we seek to find our place in his purpose – and
out of this working with God – even in the bleakest, blackest hell of human experience – some
good can come. Twenty-five years ago, I had a very dear little Swedish friend in her late
seventies who had a fine interpretation of this passage, "It means," she said, "in this world we
Christians ought always to expect the best. But prepare for the worst – then take what comes in
the strength that God supplies."

Certainly, in the first place, we ought to expect the best – that things will turn out at least
partly right sometime – even if not all right all the time – for straight pessimism is scarcely a
Christian virtue. In fact, straight pessimism causes more harm than straight wishing. George
Bernard Shaw said that _____ (rather live with a compulsive [optimisim] than a compulsive
pessimist.) a pessimist is a man who thinks everybody is as hopeless nasty as himself and then
likes them for being like him. Some Presbyterian types today – in trying to avoid an easy facile
optimism – make little room for hope. So that if you expect the best in life – they insinuate you
are naïve, unrealistic, and don't know the facts. Most novelists of our time seem to regard any
sort of optimism as a pathetic illusion – that full-grown men and women ought to be realistic –
by which they mean – pessimistic, dine on swill. As vanWyck Brooks once said, "It seems as if
our writers passively wallow in misery ... bent on proving that life is a vile little cesspool."
There is, I think, a type of emotional illness in this abject pessimism – those who always see the
dark side of everything are – as Freud saw – titillating their feelings – seeking an outlet for their
pent-up desires by wallowing in despair.

An ongoing, active, positive hope – like that of Abraham – who "in hope believed against
_____" – is harder and more demanding of maturity than pessimism. Any fool can be
pessimistic. It is seeing beyond the obvious pitfalls and difficulties to the open road ahead that
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takes character. Beyond the desert, Abraham saw a Fertile Crescent and ventured there – that
took daring and doing. Christian hope believes in the coming of the springtime – of a new
beginning – even in the dead of winter’s trouble. Said Paul, “If we hope for what we do not see,
we wait for it with patience.”

Some of you recall poor Thomas Ellwood – who was John Milton’s bumbling, awkward
secretary. He was a poet himself who wrote very bad poetry. He lived an obscure, drab and
usually disappointing life – but in the following six homely (and intentionally humorous) lines –
spoke of his own belief in better things to come. Ellwood wrote:

The winter tree
Resembles me
Whose sap lies in its root.
But, the spring draws nigh;
And as it, so I
Shall bud, I hope, and shoot.

So we too – in the chill winter of some difficulty or depression – can have faith in a coming
spring – when things will change and a few things, at least, work out right. And we like the
winter’s tree – “shall bud, again, we hope, and shoot.”

But not only should the Christian expect the best, he should also as my friend said,
prepare for the worst. For something is not going to work out all right all the time, might as well
admit it. For not only do we live in a dangerous atomic age (by the way do you recall “The
Space Child’s Mother Goose?) It goes like this:

Mary had a little lamb
Its fleece electrostatic
And everywhere that Mary went
The lights became erratic.

The lamb followed her to school one day,
Electrons all a jingle
It made the children’s hair rise up

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And finger tips tingle.

The teacher tried to turn it out

But her body was not grounded

The sparks were seen for miles around

She's still in orbit, and not yet rebounded.

We are indeed, intimidated nowadays by our own terrifying technology – and besides the dangers of an atomic age in which we must be prepared for the worst – as Carl Sandburg says, “there is also a wolf in me” – one can imagine George Bernard Shaw saying that, for an admitted old wolf he certainly was, but Carl Sandburg? Yes, even he. – an animal, a wilderness side to our own human nature in us that must be watched and restrained. And besides all this there is accident and illness to look forward to. Katherine Mansfield, that brilliant English author, when she had conquered many other problems and then suddenly discovered that on top of everything else she had tuberculosis, wrote, “There is no limit to human suffering. When one thinks: Now I have touched the bottom of the sea – now I can go no deeper, one goes still deeper.”

The Presbyterian services of infant baptism, the wedding and the funeral all have in common the element of warning: of expect the best in this child, this marriage, this life – but “be prepared for the worst.” The service of infant baptism reminds parents of the “perils of childhood” – the “temptations of youth” – which they must help their child through. The wedding service says to the couple – you might as well expect “sickness, trouble and sorrow” for that what you’re going to get -- so “comfort one another” in it. And learn to “bear with” (put up with) each other’s “infirmities and weaknesses: -- for God knows you both have plenty of them – and so it ought not to come as a shock to you that your marriage is in no way the perfect one. And the funeral service warns the family and friends of the “shortness and uncertainty of their life too – so make each day count for God – and don’t spoil a single hour.

Thus, the Christian ought to expect the best, but every service of worship reminds us – be prepared for the worst, for things so seldom work out all right.

And then “take what comes in God’s good strength and spirit.”

Robert Browning wrote:

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Oh, we're sunk enough here, God knows!

But not quite so sunk that moments
Sure tho' seldom, are denied us,
When the spirits true endearments
Stand out plainly from its false ones.

That is to say, no matter how sunk – how low – the Christian is – we are at times granted opening skies – the insight to see God at work in this painful old world – yes, God's very presence – granting us courage we would never have known without this pain to face – granting us faith we would never have felt but for these doubts – granting us a divine helper we would never have known existed if we had not felt so weak and helpless ourselves. The old folk wisdom is true: "No pain, no gain ..."

But – it is not always easy to take what comes when things turn out all wrong – especially if we have tried to live the good life and think we deserve better. In a sonnet, Gerard Manley Hopkins argues with God – asks why his attempts to live rightly have not paid off – with irritated respect he says to the Almighty:

Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend with thee; but, Sir, so what
I plead is just. Why do sinners' ways prosper and why must
disappointment all I endeavor end? Wert thou my enemy, O thou
my friend, how wouldst thou worse, I wonder, thou then does now
defeat, thwart me?

Mine, O thou Lord of life, send my roots rain.

Yes – the righteous man often pleads his just desserts to a God who seems unhearing. Hopkins' poem must be a paraphrase of Jeremiah's pleading with God. Jeremiah, too, gets after the Almighty.

Righteous art thou, O Lord, when I plead with thee; yet let me talk with thee of thy judgements; wherefore doth the way of the wicked prosper?....They have taken root; they grow; yea, they bring forth fruit..." (Jer 12:1-2)

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It is the pitiable plea of a poor righteous man to be remembered – “What about me? O Lord! What about me?” You look after the rascals, so “Send my roots rain.”

I have often quoted to you my very favorite saint, Saint Thomas – “It is no wonder you have so few friends, O my God – you treat the few you have so badly”

Well – things so seldom turn out all right – even for the most righteous – so we can only “expect the best, be prepared for the worst and take what comes – with a strength not our own – with God’s companioning strength – with a spirit not our own – with God’s spirit of love –

After all – was not the “Little Master,” as the _____ call him, crucified – but was he not raised again from the dead?

God is no keeper of books, you see – paying us our just desserts – at least not in this world – maybe if he did, we would suffer more.

Here, all we can say with St. Paul is – “God works with those who love him” – and “who shall separate us from the love of Christ?”

And ultimately? The Christian believes with Christ’s final triumph –his return to glory – all things do turn out all right – that lies die – and truth lives – and right is vindicated – if not in this life – then in the life to be. Remember Lowell’s lines?

Though the cause of Evil prosper, yet tis Truth alone is strong,
Truth forever on the scaffold, wrong forever on the throne, --
Yet that scaffold sways the future, and behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God with the shadow, keeping watch above his own.

My favorite seminary professor – a non-nonsense old gentlemen of great faith who had taught New Testament in Chinese for thirty years – before the great rebellion – and often quoted these lines of the poet:

I know not where his islands
Lift their froned palms mid-air
I only know I cannot drift
Beyond his love and care.