

Do Not Be Afraid . . . God Hears!

Introduction

Opening Remarks

- A. Good morning Mercy Hill! Let me just begin by saying: I love you and I miss you. This is obviously a different format for us. I'm going to miss gathering as one body on Sundays with you for a little bit—it seems it may be this way at least through the end of March.
- B. Before we dive in here, let me first make a few remarks about the process and what we're doing here.
 - 1. I'm going to share from God's word, but one of the things I'd love you to do before we begin, is download the Worship Guide that you can find on the same page as this message. It's there where the sermon Handouts are usually uploaded. This will help you follow along and things.
 - 2. We're going to shoot for a bit more of a punctuated, interactive experience. Which means throughout the course of this study, I'm going to invite you to hit pause and reflect and pray on a few things.
 - a. If you're watching this with your family, friends, Home Group, or other Mercy Hill members, you can take these moments to discuss and pray together.
 - b. If you you're watching alone, I'd encourage you to still make use of this. Pause and journal and engage God in this.
 - 3. Near the end of the Worship Guide, you'll see that we still have what we've called during our regular Services a "Call to Response." Obviously, this has to change a bit, but there we put a few songs we'd encourage you to check out and worship along with. You'll also find ways to go about sharing prayer requests and giving your offering online if that's something you'd like to do.
- C. So, hit pause, grab that Worship Guide, maybe print it out or whatever so you can look at it while watching the video, and let's go!

Stepping Out of Luke

- A. Now, as we make our way towards the sermon or study for this morning, you should know that for however long this goes on, assuming we're not talking months (God forbid), I'm planning to step out of our sermon series through the gospel of Luke. There's a couple of reasons for this:
 - 1. First, truth be told, I'm too attached to that and I didn't want to try to push that into this different context. I'll pick back up with that series once we're able to gather back together for our Sunday Services.

2. But there's another reason for this as well, and that is because I do think the current state of affairs does beg to be addressed in some particular way and a series perhaps more immediately relevant to the pressing matters at hand seemed to me to be prudent and wise.

Let's Talk about Fear

- A. All that to say, for these, however many weeks, I'm planning to discuss with you the idea of fear and being afraid. And we'll look at what the Scriptures have to say about this and how God can help us with it.
- B. I am sure you have noticed by now that, given the COVID-19 virus—with the spread of it so vast now that it's reached pandemic status—we are a city, and a nation, and a world, even, in many ways gripped by fear and anxiety and panic.
 1. I know you've seen it—in the news and in your neighborhoods.
- C. I'll give you a few examples on this point:
 1. One of the evidences that we are dealing with panic as a people right now is that, sadly, we see so many crooks coming out from the shadows and trying to take advantage of us. They know we're vulnerable—that we're not in our right mind and so we are prone to throw our money at stuff that seems to promise security and safety regardless of how foolish it may at first seem.
 - a. I read one article entitled: [Coronavirus: How Hackers Are Preying on Fears of Covid-19](#). And it tells of all these various ways hackers are taking advantage of our panic. Some of them are sending mass-blast emails out pretending to be from some whistleblowing doctor who's claiming that China and the UK have the vaccine but it's being covered up by their governments and all you have to do is click here and it's yours. And people are doing it. And now you've got two viruses. One in the body and another in your computer.
 - b. Perhaps you saw how that embarrassing televangelist, Jim Bakker, was claiming to have some sort of "cure" for COVID-19 and attempting to sell it. And people were buying it up. Because we're scared.
 - c. Maybe you've seen how people are buying out all the hand sanitizer—there's literally a shortage of the stuff—and then they're selling it on Craig's List or eBay and things like this for ten times the price. One article I looked at mentioned a guy who happened to find a bottle of Purell at Rite Aid for \$7.99 and he sold it later that same day on eBay for \$138. It's wrong. But it's a sign that we're all freaked out a bit.
 2. And, of course, if you need just a little bit more evidence of this, all you have to do is try to go get some groceries at Costco. It's crazy. I've been trying to get toilet paper there for like three weeks without any luck. While so much of the market is going down, Costco's stock is one of those that is just shooting up. The title of one article sums it up nicely: ["Costco Cleans Up on Coronavirus Anxiety."](#)

- D. Now, I don't know how you're personally doing with it, but I imagine many of us are starting to get a little uneasy too.
1. And even if you're not too worried about getting the virus itself—maybe you're not in one of those high-risk groups—my guess is that there are still a lot of things spinning out from all of this that you are tempted to be afraid of.
 - a. Am I going to lose my job because of this? They're laying off people at work.
 - b. My investments are tanking with the market. What's going to happen to our finances? Is it all going to bounce back? When? How long?
 - c. I may not be high-risk, but I've got loved ones who are and I'm worried sick about them.

So What Do We Do?

- A. So what do we do with all of this? How should Christians be handling it? What is the right response?
- B. Well, I wonder if you know what the most repeated command in all the Bible is?
1. It's not "love your neighbor." It's not "love God" or "praise God" or "worship God." It's not "make disciples." It's not one of the ten commandments.
 2. It's "do not be afraid." In my searching I found the Scriptures calling us to variations of this sort of thing over 100 times. Others claim that, depending on your translation, it shows up 200-300 times. Whatever the case, it's a lot.
- C. When we consider the sheer weight of this statistic, we can immediately glean at least two things:
1. First fear, being afraid, is not just a Coronavirus issue. It's not unique to these circumstances. It's not something we deal with here or there when times really get tough. No. It is a perennial, everyday issue for everyone. That's why He's saying it again and again and again. "Do not be afraid." He has to say it so many times, because we so often are . . . afraid.
 2. But, secondly, we can also glean from this that God is bigger and stronger than anything we are currently worried about.
 - a. When He tells us to not fear, He is not saying it to simply get us off His back, because our worries are starting to annoy Him or whatever. He is not discounting or disregarding us in these moments.
 - b. Nor is He speaking to us as one who is naively optimistic and just always sees things through a rosy lens regardless of reality. We have those friends. I can be sometimes this way. "Don't worry about it. It will be okay." "Yeah, but who are you? How do you know that?"

- i. But God is God. And when He says not to be afraid He has very good reasons for doing so. As Ed Welch says in his wonderful book: *Running Scared: Fear, Worry, and the God of Rest*: “[When God says] ‘Do not be afraid’ [these] are not the words of a flesh-and-blood friend, a mere human like yourself. They are not the hollow words of a fellow passenger on a sinking ship, who has no experience in shipwrecks, can’t swim, and has no plan. These words are more like those of the captain who says, ‘Don’t be afraid. I know what to do.’ When the right person speaks these words you might be comforted. Remember ‘Do not be afraid’ are the words of the One who can match speech with action. He is the sovereign King who really is in control. The efficacy of the words is directly related to the authority, power and love of the One speaking them” (p. 62).

D. The words “do not be afraid” could be cheap, superficial counsel or naïve optimism . . . but when it is the God of the universe who speaks them to us they are rock solid realities.

The Coming Weeks

- A. So all I want to do in these coming weeks is drop into some texts where this command shows up. We’ll just pick one each week and reflect on it together. There are so many of them. That’s why I say we could do this for a few weeks ongoing and I think it will continue to be edifying.
 1. We’ll take the subject on from different angles. And we’ll talk about why we do not need to be afraid and what sorts of emotions and activities should be replacing that fear.
- B. My hope is that, even in this virtual format, we create a sort of sanctuary space for us every Sunday where we know we’re going to come together and consider afresh the ways God meets us in our fears and sets us on new footing in Christ.
 1. You need that. I need that. We all, I think, are going to need this sort of thing, especially in these trying times.

→ Pause and consider the questions under Pause Point #1

The Text

- A. For this morning we’re going to drop into the story of Hagar and Ishmael in [Gen 21:8-21](#).
 1. You remember, Hagar was Sarah’s servant.
 2. And because Sarah was barren and couldn’t provide Abraham with an heir, together they decided he should go in and sleep with Hagar.
 3. And, it’s no good, but he does, and Hagar gets pregnant and gives birth to Ishmael.
 4. Now, about 13 or so years later, God comes to make good on His earlier promise that Sarah would bear Abraham a child, however impossible that would seem, with Sarah barren and Abraham now 100 years old.
 5. But she does. And they name him Isaac—which means in Hebrew “he laughs.”

6. And that's really where we pick up the story . . .

⁸ And the child [Isaac] grew and was weaned [which in Hebrew culture would've taken place when he was about 2-3 years old]. And Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. ⁹ But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, laughing. ¹⁰ So she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac." ¹¹ And the thing was very displeasing to Abraham on account of his son. ¹² But God said to Abraham, "Be not displeased because of the boy and because of your slave woman. Whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for through Isaac shall your offspring be named. ¹³ And I will make a nation of the son of the slave woman also, because he is your offspring." ¹⁴ So Abraham rose early in the morning and took bread and a skin of water and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba.

¹⁵ When the water in the skin was gone, she put the child under one of the bushes. ¹⁶ Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot, for she said, "Let me not look on the death of the child." And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. ¹⁷ And God heard the voice of the boy, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. ¹⁸ Up! Lift up the boy, and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make him into a great nation." ¹⁹ Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. And she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink. ²⁰ And God was with the boy, and he grew up. He lived in the wilderness and became an expert with the bow. ²¹ He lived in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt. (Gen 21:8-21)

Do Not Be Afraid . . . God Hears!

A. The title of this little message is: Do Not Be Afraid . . . God Hears!

1. As I said, each week we'll come at the idea of not being afraid from a different text and a different angle. But this week is going to focus in on this idea that we don't need to be afraid because God hears—our cries, our prayers.

a. And, of course, it's [v. 17](#) that brings this out in particular. So that's going to be the place of my focus, though we'll do some work on either side of it to help set it forth in all its glory.

B. So we're going to move through three headings in particular this morning: (1) The Wilderness ([vv. 8-16a](#)); (2) The Weeping ([vv. 16b-18](#)); and (3) The Well ([vv. 19-21](#)).

(1) The Wilderness (vv. 8-16a)

A. Now, clearly I don't have much time to linger here. I'm looking to really just fill out a bit what this wilderness experience would have been like for Hagar and Ishmael. But I should say at least a few words about how they got there.

B. At this point, Isaac's about three years old. Ishmael's somewhere around 16. And mom and dad are just overjoyed at this miracle baby that God had given them. So we're told in [v. 8](#) that "Abraham made a great feast" for his boy on the day he was weaned. Everybody's coming out and celebrating.

1. But not Ishmael. You get it, right? Wouldn't you feel like: "What's up with all of this? You've got this big old party for him? What about me? I never got all this. And by all accounts, I'm the firstborn!"
- C. So he's feeling outside, he's feeling forgotten, he's feeling jealous. And it seems to me that's why he goes on to mock Isaac there in v. 9: "But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, laughing."
1. We know from how Sarah responds to all of this, it wasn't a nice kind of laughter. Even Paul the apostle later referring to this event in Gal 4:29 says that Ishmael "persecuted him."
- D. My guess is he was probably mocking Isaac for his name: "he laughs." And so here's Ishmael laughing at him in a derisive sort of way.
1. No doubt any one of us who's ever lived through the elementary and middle school lunch hour days know what it's like to be made fun of or to make fun of others for a name. People used to call me "We(e)ber" because, if you've noticed I only have one b in my last name, not two. (Indeed, some well-meaning individuals trying to pronounce it properly still come to this same thing.)
 - a. It wasn't all that devastating, but there are some names that lend themselves to worse jokes and jabs than others.
- E. Whatever else is going on here, it is clear that Sarah isn't going to have it. The long and short of it is that Sarah gets Abraham to send mother and son away.
1. So Abraham gets a little bit of bread, and a little bit of water, and he sends Hagar and Ishmael out. "And [they] departed and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba" (v. 14).
- F. Then look at vv. 15-16a, it's tragic: "¹⁵ When the water in the skin was gone, she put the child under one of the bushes. ¹⁶ Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot, for she said, 'Let me not look on the death of the child.'" "No more food. No more water. My boy's dying. I can't even bear to look at him. It's over!"
1. I wonder if you've ever felt that way? Forsaken, forgotten, abandoned . . . afraid for your life?

→ Pause and consider the questions under Pause Point #2

(2) The Weeping (vv. 16b-18)

Is There Anyone?

- A. We carry on v. 16 and find that Hagar gives herself to wailing and weeping (and who wouldn't?!): "And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept" (v. 16b).

- B. I recently saw a blog post by Aaron Sironi of CCEF entitled: *“When Nobody Else Listens, God Listens.”*
1. He opens the post with a discussion of Demi Lovato’s moving performance at the 2020 Grammys. I don’t know if you saw it, but there she took the stage for the first time in over 18 months. And she performed her song entitled *“Anyone”* which she wrote just days, even hours perhaps, before she had to be hospitalized for what appears to have been a drug overdose.
 - a. The song itself, now heard after the fact, is clearly a desperate cry for help, not altogether unlike this cry of Hagar in the wilderness.
- C. Let me read you some of the lyrics: *“I tried to talk to my piano, / I tried to talk to my guitar. / Talk to my imagination / Confided into alcohol / I tried and tried and tried some more / Told secrets ‘til my voice was sore / Tired of empty conversation / ‘Cause no one hears me anymore / [Chorus] A hundred million stories / And a hundred million songs / I feel stupid when I sing / Nobody’s listening to me / Nobody’s listening / I talk to shooting stars / But they always get it wrong / I feel stupid when I pray / So, why am I praying anyway? / If nobody’s listening / Anyone, please send me anyone / Lord, is there anyone? / I need someone / Anyone, please send me anyone / Lord, is there anyone? / I need someone.”*
1. This is what life is like in the wilderness. It’s hot. It’s hard. It’s scary. And sometimes, if we’re honest, it feels like even the Lord isn’t there. *“Even God is off too busy with more important matters. He’s tending to Isaac’s needs. He’s not concerned about me.”*

God Has Heard

- A. Oh but He is! Wherever your wilderness is, He is right there with you. Whatever you are weeping about, He is ready and wanting to attend to it. So now we come to [v. 17](#): *“¹⁷ And God heard the voice of the boy, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is.¹⁸ Up! Lift up the boy, and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make him into a great nation” (vv. 17-18).*
- B. *“Fear not.”* There’s our command. But on what basis?
1. *“I look out and it all seems hopeless. Wilderness. Drought. Dehydration. ‘Fear not?!’ There’s a lot to fear. Tell me: Why should I not be afraid?”*
 - a. Answer: *“for God has heard . . .”* He hears you. He hears Ishmael. And He is on the move for good.
- C. How could Hagar have forgotten this? After all, she named her son Ishmael (which in Hebrew means *“God hears”*) specifically because of a previous experience back in [Gen 16](#) where yet again she was fleeing from Sarah in the wilderness and *“the LORD . . . listened to [her] affliction” (v. 11).*
1. She knew this of Him, and yet each new trial comes with its own set of fresh temptations, right? *“Yeah You were there for me then, but are You here for me now? Because I’m dying. And I’m scared.”*

D. And then, again, in comes the word: “Fear not, for God has heard . . .” (v. 17).

1. That’s the turning point in the narrative!

a. That’s the turning point in your trials. It is not hopeless. You don’t have to buy into Jim Bakker’s cure, or buy a year’s worth of toilet paper, or chug down a bottle of pills. Someone is out there. Some is listening. God hears.

E. And now let’s watch what He does . . .

→ Pause and consider the questions under Pause Point #3

(3) The Well (vv. 19-21)

Wells in the Wilderness

A. Look at v. 19: “Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. And she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink.”

B. Wow, I think this is so powerful. Did you notice? It is not so much that the situation is immediately changed, right? They’re not immediately taken out of the wilderness. It’s just that their eyes are opened to see the well that’s right there for them in the middle of the wilderness.

1. He didn’t take them somewhere else. Instead, He opened up to them something of His abundance right there in the midst of it.

C. And this has been the testimony of saints down through the ages. I think of that classic expression of David in Psa 23: “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies” (v. 5a).

1. Notice, it’s not: “Once I get through dealing with my enemies, then I’ll have a feast.” That’s how we tend to think of it. Once we get through this Coronavirus thing alive, we’ll be okay, and have peace, and smile again, or whatever.

a. But the feast is right here in the presence of my enemies. The well is right here in the midst of the wilderness. Because God is here. He is listening. He cares.

Streams of Living Water

A. If you noticed, in our text it is actually the “angel of God” (v. 17) who speaks from heaven to Hagar there.

B. Now, there are many scholars who think this “angel of God” or the “angel of the Lord” is Himself the pre-incarnate Jesus.

1. For in many texts what this angel of the Lord says or does is immediately and with notable ease attributed to God Himself.
 2. Furthering this notion is the intriguing fact that this “angel of the Lord” never does make an appearance in the NT. Or does He?
- C. Whatever the case may be, certainly we can say that the wonder of all we see in this story with Hagar and Ishmael does come to its climactic expression in the person and work of Jesus Christ.
1. We are wandering lost and scared in the wilderness, guilty and ashamed, broken and bruised, with a fallen and cursed world all round about us . . .
 - a. And He doesn’t just speak from somewhere up above us. That in itself would be glorious, as it is for Hagar here. But our Savior does more, doesn’t He? He enters in. He meets us in the desert.
- D. And what we come to understand is that He doesn’t just open our eyes to some well in the midst of the wilderness. He Himself becomes our well.
1. What we see back in [Gen 21](#) with Hagar and Ishmael is not too unlike what we see Jesus doing in [John 4](#) with the woman at the well is it?
 - a. You remember what He says to her while she is in the midst of her personal wilderness, dying spiritually, and desperately looking for water: “[W]hoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (v. 14).
- E. And, of course, we know how He will become this well of living water for us, don’t we?
1. He does even more than just meet us in the wilderness, doesn’t He. He dies there.
 - a. Ishmael is laid under a bush to die and God says: “No, get him up. I’ve got water for you.”
 - b. But then, when God’s own Son, Jesus, perfect and righteous through and through, is hanging on the cross, crying out for water—“I thirst” ([John 19:28](#))—He is given nothing but a sponge soaked in sour wine and a cupful of His Father’s wrath.
- F. And He drank that down so that sinners like you and me could have access to water . . . even in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. We can cry out and know: I don’t have to be afraid . . . because God hears. He’s with us even in this.

Social Distancing and Drawing Near

- A. And I think that this is a very timely word for us here in our current space. And this is what I’ll leave you with. Some of you guys find yourself now, perhaps with more time on your hands. School’s cancelled. Events are cancelled. Working from home.

1. You're supposed to socially distance yourself for the sake of the common good. But let me encourage you towards something. You may have to socially distance yourself from other people, but this really can be a powerful time of drawing near in prayer to Jesus.
 - a. Don't, I beg you, waste these spare moments you're given numbing yourself with more TV or Netflix binging. Use it to get on your face with Hagar, even in the midst of the wilderness, and cry out to the God who hears.

→ Pause and consider the questions under Pause Point #4

Call to Response

- Sing
- Pray
- Give