



New Day Church

Need a fresh start?

TRANSFORMATIONS, PART III TRANSFORMING MY FEARS

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We're only two days away from Halloween, so here's a little Halloween trivia question for you: How much money do Americans spend on Halloween candy every year? Would you believe \$2 billion? That's way more than for any other holiday, including Valentine's day and Christmas. The country will spend almost \$5 billion on costumes and related stuff. It's big business.

My boys have now crossed a line somewhere that says it's no longer fun to wear cute character costumes – you have to be something scary. It's all about making people jump. Every time we go past the Halloween costumes in the store, they see the creepiest, most hideous masks and go, "Cool!" Nobody gets into the pagan spirit of things like the pastor's kids.

I was talking with Darian last week, who's from Australia, and he was a little bewildered by the whole holiday. They don't have anything quite like it in Australia. It is a little strange when you stop to think about it. People disguising themselves, asking complete strangers for candy and trying to scare each other. We go through haunted houses that we know will make us scream. We hang fake cobwebs in our windows. We scoop slimy pumpkin guts out with our hands, then put candles inside the pumpkin shell. And we put apples in a tub of water and then try to get them out with our teeth. There are any number of odd things about the rituals.

And yet, a lot of people like Halloween more than any other holiday. They like being frightened out of their minds. They like the pit in their stomach when they head out in the dark and know somebody's going to jump out at them from behind a bush. It's one of the most popular days of the year.

It could have something to do with that \$2 billion worth of candy I mentioned earlier. But I have another theory. I think we like all the haunted houses and scary movies and frightening aspects of Halloween, because it is managed fear. We like to go through being scared when it's all in fun and will be over soon. It's that sense of relief on the far side of fear that makes it a good rush instead of a bad one. Our heart gets pounding, but it's in a controlled environment. So we come away feeling like we've conquered a fear.

That's a fake kind of fear, where we're never really in any danger. Next thing you know, it's November 1st and the fright is past. Dealing with our real fears isn't quite as neat and tidy.

What can God do with our fears? That's what we want to look at this morning. Our series from the Psalms has been focused on how God transforms various aspects of our lives. Even what first seems negative can be changed into something new through the power of God's grace.

Just a few weeks ago, we talked about how God does that with our emotions. We didn't specifically address fear, though, and I think it's a big enough emotion to merit a sermon of its own. Because we all wrestle with our fears.

From the time we're just babies we are introduced to fears. Those fears evolve as we grow. When we're 5 to 10 months old, we learn to fear strangers. If we don't recognize a face or a voice we grow nervous. By the time we're a year old, that develops into separation anxiety. We don't like mom to leave. Then as we become toddlers and preschoolers, we have difficulty separating reality from fantasy, and we begin to fear imaginary things like monsters under the bed and loud noises like the vacuum.

Once we get old enough to venture off to school, we learn that there are fears of going by ourselves different places. Thoughts of being stuck in an elevator, getting lost, being chased by small animals or standing in high up places make us nervous.

Our fears take on more concrete form as we move through grade school. Dentists, doctors, burglars, airplanes. Real world concerns begin to press in. By junior high, we've learned to fear social situations and places where we're evaluated. Getting up in front of people, being teased or embarrassed, taking tests... These are the more sophisticated fears that follow us into adulthood.

As grown ups, we can hang on to any of those fears from childhood and add more on top of it. Adults fear things like change, rejection, making the wrong choice, disappointing people, failure, being alone and being insignificant, to name a few. One of my big fears is conflict. I hate confrontation. I practically hyperventilate sometimes when I need to tell somebody a harsh truth. My palms sweat, my heart pounds, I can't catch my breath. Fear can be paralyzing – it's so strong we can have a deep, physical response to it.

Can God transform our fears? I believe he can and does. He doesn't want us to be crippled by them any longer.

There are a couple different ways we could approach our topic. Music producer T-Bone Burnett says Christians can choose to sing about two things: Either the stuff that's exposed by the light, or the light itself. For the past couple messages, our starting point has been the stuff exposed by the light, with our doubt and negative feelings. This morning I'd like to focus on the light – the hope God gives us. We'll take the spotlight

off fear itself and throw it onto God as the one who relieves our fears. Psalm 91 is the perfect place to do that.

Psalm 91

*He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High
will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.
I will say of the LORD, "He is my refuge and my fortress,
my God, in whom I trust."*

*Surely he will save you from the fowler's snare
and from the deadly pestilence.
He will cover you with his feathers,
and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.*

*You will not fear the terror of night,
nor the arrow that flies by day,
nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness,
nor the plague that destroys at midday.*

*A thousand may fall at your side,
ten thousand at your right hand,
but it will not come near you.
You will only observe with your eyes
and see the punishment of the wicked.*

*If you make the Most High your dwelling —
even the LORD, who is my refuge —
then no harm will befall you,
no disaster will come near your tent.*

*For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways;
they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.
You will tread upon the lion and the cobra;
you will trample the great lion and the serpent.*

*"Because he loves me," says the LORD, "I will rescue him;
I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name.
He will call upon me, and I will answer him;
I will be with him in trouble,
I will deliver him and honor him.
With long life will I satisfy him
and show him my salvation."*

Fear is a popular topic to write about. I checked out a bunch of books this week to see what advice various authors are giving about fear. It ranged from the silly “Write down how much time you spend worrying each day,” to the guilt producing “Fear is sin and you need to repent!” to the impossible “Avoid all forms of fatigue.”

But nothing I read compared to Psalm 91 and the way it treats fear. This Psalm is so full of confidence. It’s reassuring from top to bottom, saying that we can have true freedom from fear. And it’s so solidly grounded that it seems unshakable. There’s no “Try this and hopefully it will help.” There’s no pep talk on the ten best ways to conquer fear. It’s a strong, calm message that says, “Fear has no place here.” What gave the writer that sense of security, that complete confidence that things would be okay?

It isn’t that he doesn’t treat fear seriously. All the imagery that relates to fear in this Psalm is that of battles and traps and disease. If anything, the psalm writer understands fear better than us. He knows all too well that it is

More than a feeling

Fear isn’t just an emotion. It is a powerful, paralyzing force. The Bible talks about people being seized by fear or gripped by fear, and those are good descriptions, because that is the sensation you get when you are afraid. Fear paralyzes and constrains us.

What keeps us from standing up to defend somebody? Fear. What keeps us from exploring that new job opportunity? Fear. What keeps us from praying in public or saying what we really feel or reaching out to someone we don’t know or trying something we’ve never done before or stepping into a new ministry? It all comes down to fear.

Sometimes fear can even drive us to try and prevent other people from doing what they are supposed to do. Sheila Walsh is a Christian singer and speaker. She had an opportunity to go with World Vision to speak in Ghana, and she really felt that God was telling her to go. But her husband Barry felt differently. He threw every kind of objection at her he could think of, that it wouldn’t be good for their son, that her schedule was already too busy, that she couldn’t afford to get sick, etc. It grows into a very heated argument between them that they can’t seem to resolve.

Finally, they go to see a counselor for help, and Sheila writes, “We talk about the Ghana thing. We know it’s more than the Ghana thing. Barry finally confesses that the bottom line is that he’s afraid something will happen to me and I won’t come home. Loving makes us so vulnerable.”

Sometimes our fear comes out sounding like anger. And whether it’s in our relationships with other people or just our own hearts, when fear creeps in, it gets such a hold on us that we can’t move. I heard on the news this week that they have imposed a new curfew in Baghdad. Cars are not allowed on the road during certain hours. You can’t be out

driving around in the middle of the night. The curfew is an attempt to halt the violence that has been non-stop lately. The goal is to stop the activity. The theory is that if you can immobilize people, they won't be able to do anything.

There is a war going on for our souls, and our enemy knows that if he can immobilize us with fear, his job is done. He would like nothing better than to keep us afraid so we aren't effective. Fear isn't just a feeling that we don't enjoy – it's spiritual warfare. It is a tool used against us to hold us down.

The psalm writer recognizes that. And he has just one word for us:

Relocate.

*He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High
will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.*

A few verses later he says it again:

*If you make the Most High your dwelling —
even the LORD, who is my refuge —
then no harm will befall you,
no disaster will come near your tent.*

In this entire Psalm, that's the only thing we're told to do – make God our home. When we're up against our fears, our job isn't to dig down deep and ratchet up our courage. Our main agenda is to dwell in God.

But what does that mean in practical terms? How do we make him our dwelling? There are a few things I know about regular home life that help me think about how to make God my spiritual home. First,

Home is where you unpack.

If you've ever relocated, you may have had to go through that transitional phase where you live out of boxes for a while. I've known military families who were stationed in one place for just a year or two, and they leave most everything packed up, because they know it's not their final home.

Home is where you settle in for the long term. You unpack all your boxes. You commit to the space and make it yours. You hang pictures, paint walls and decorate, because you plan to stay there a while.

Making God your home is making a commitment to him for the long haul. It is the conscious decision to unpack your stuff. You choose him as your permanent place. Dave Wittenberg talked a few weeks ago about betting the farm on God and not having other sources of security as a back up plan. We're either in or we're out. When we make God our home, we're not holding part of ourselves back – we're sold out to Jesus 100%.

Sometimes when you move, you still have a few boxes that you haven't opened. We've got some in our house that have been in the garage for the past four years. Every once in a while, we'll remember something we haven't seen in a long time, and we'll go rummaging around out there until we find it.

When we make God our home, it takes us a lifetime to unpack. We'll think we're done, only to discover there's another box in our heart that we haven't let him open yet. But as we find them, we give them to God, because home is where you unpack, and God becomes more fully our home as we set down roots in him and plant ourselves there.

Home is where you spend time.

Secondly, home is where you want to be. You sleep there, you hang out with your family there, you refuel there. Home is your place to rest and recharge.

Even after the best vacations, when we've seen and done a lot, when we get back, it seems like Karin and I always look at each other and say, "Isn't it good to be home?" There's just something about being back in your own bed.

When God is our dwelling place, we want to be with him and spend time with him. We make it a priority to cultivate that time. I know a guy who had such a long commute that he couldn't get up earlier for any devotional time, so he bought a Bible on CD and would listen to it on his way to work. We'll go out of our way for Starbucks – how out of our way do we go to spend time with God?

Making God our home is an investment of ourselves in our spiritual relationship with him. It's saying, "This is where I want to be."

Another point we could make about where we live is that

Home is where you are most yourself.

I don't usually look forward to attending weddings, but I love to come home from weddings. It feels so great to get out of those dress up clothes and put on something comfortable. Kick off the shoes, lose the jacket, get rid of the tie. I can hardly wait to get grubby again.

You can do that at home and nobody cares. You're not trying to impress anyone. You can moonwalk across the floor, sing in the shower and burp the alphabet if you want. Home is the place where you're free to let down your guard and be yourself. You're not putting on a show, because you're HOME!

God being our dwelling place means it is safe to be ourselves with him. We don't need to worry about being rejected. We don't have to try to impress anyone. God invites us to be real and honest. We might as well be, because he knows the real us anyway.

You might have grown up in a home where it wasn't safe to be you, so your associations with that word aren't positive. God is saying to you, "Let me give you a new definition of home. Discover what it is meant to be. I made you to be you and I love who you are and I will be your shelter."

We make God our dwelling by choosing him, spending time with him and being honest with him.

God himself is the answer to fear. We try to find our security in so many other places. We look for it in our work. We look for it in our relationships. We look for it in our financial success. We look for it in our children. Even in being religious and going to church. But none of those places is an impenetrable fortress. Fear can always find its way in. God is the only sure refuge.

I love the line "no disaster will come near your tent." As I've mentioned before, my brother-in-law is in Iraq right now, working in a military hospital that is literally in a big tent. A tent in Iraq sounds like a very unsafe place to be. But the tent is in the middle of a U.S. military compound that's 10 miles in diameter. Even though it's in Iraq, no insurgents can get anywhere near it. Even though there is war all around, the tent is one of the safest places to be, because of its location.

Psalm 125:2

As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the LORD surrounds his people both now and forevermore.

No disaster will come near your tent when your tent is completely surrounded by God. When God is our home, he addresses our fears.

The rest of the Psalm is devoted to how God does that, and the writer transitions to a new metaphor. After encouraging us to make God our home, he shifts to describe the way God guards us from our fears:

*Surely he will save you from the fowler's snare
and from the deadly pestilence.
He will cover you with his feathers,
and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.*

God trips the trap

This is an amazing passage to me. It says that God will save us from the fowler's snare. A fowler's snare is a bird trap. Hunters put them where a bird goes to get food, to trick them and capture them. The devil is like that bird hunter, laying traps for us, and it says that God saves us from them. How does he do it? Not by breaking the trap, but by becoming a bird himself! I've always like the imagery of God as the mother bird, keeping us under his wings. But I never associated it with the verse before it that shows

how he put himself in harm's way for us, as if letting himself be the one the bird hunter goes after.

In April of this year, a Category 4 tornado hit Hendersonville, Tennessee. Jerrod Hawkins was a firefighter working 45 minutes away from home. He was on his cell phone with his wife Amy, when she said, "I know it's here...I have to go," and quickly hung up. She ran and grabbed her two sons, 6 year old Jair and 4 year old Cole, and she hurried to the basement.

That storm completely decimated the family's home. It took neighbors 2 rescue attempts to even find Amy and the boys in the rubble. When they finally found them, they discovered Amy unconscious, her arms wrapped tightly around the boys. She had used her body as a human shield. Her sons say that during the storm, she kept grabbing them with her arms and pushing them back to safety underneath her body. They could feel her absorb the blows as pieces of the house kept falling on top of her.

The boys emerged unscathed, but Amy's body was pummeled. Her back was broken, her lungs were punctured, she had severe head trauma and she ended up paralyzed from the waist down. It cost her dearly. She truly sacrificed herself for the sake of her children.

That's the story of the cross, isn't it? Jesus, pulling us to himself, taking the blows so we wouldn't have to, sacrificing himself for us, so that we could be free of our greatest fears. He stepped into the fowler's snare so that we could escape.

Because of that, the Psalm writer says,

*You will not fear the terror of night,
nor the arrow that flies by day,
nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness,
nor the plague that destroys at midday.*

*A thousand may fall at your side,
ten thousand at your right hand,
but it will not come near you.*

There was a woman on the radio this week who grew up in a family with 10 kids. Her parents made them all memorize Psalm 91, and they would recite them before going off to public school. Mom and Dad didn't feel like they could keep track of all 10 kids at any given time, so they wanted to make sure each of them had these words ringing in their ears, so no matter what they faced, they would know that God could see them even when their parents could not.

No matter what the danger, no matter the time of day or night, we can count on the protection of God's wings over us. When those arrows of the enemy are all around, though thousands and ten thousands may fall, it doesn't matter. God is keeping track of us. And the cross stands as a witness to the lengths God is willing to go to for us.

Ironically, it was this very Psalm that Satan quoted to Jesus to try to talk him out of going to the cross. It's the only passage of Scripture with the notorious distinction of being quoted out of context by the devil. When Satan tried to get Jesus to throw himself off the top of the temple, he wanted to convince him that God wouldn't let anything happen to him because of these verses:

*For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways;
they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.*

Jesus recognized it as a trap and called Satan's bluff. Jesus knew that God's role in our lives doesn't guarantee we won't ever be in danger or experience hardship. The words here are not a ticket out of the perils of life. If anyone had the right to claim that kind of treatment from God, it would be Jesus. But he didn't. He knew that God's purposes in his life were going to involve hardship and struggle and pain.

So difficulties don't go away. But that doesn't mean we need to be controlled by fear. God may not promise a trouble free existence, but he does make promises. In fact, he makes a whole series of promises at the end of the chapter.

*"Because he loves me," says the LORD, "I will rescue him;
I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name.
He will call upon me, and I will answer him;
I will be with him in trouble,
I will deliver him and honor him.
With long life will I satisfy him
and show him my salvation."*

To make it even more clear to see, here are the promises:

I will rescue
I will protect
I will answer
I will be present in trouble
I will deliver
I will honor
I will satisfy
I will save

Eight times God voices his commitment. Eight times he reaffirms his resolve to save us from all our fears. I think he knows that we need to hear over and over again that he is firmly on our side. He knew we needed to see all the different ways he will come to our rescue every time.

There is a scene from the Lion King that captures the idea so well. Simba, the young lion goes to the elephant graveyard, where he has specifically been warned not to go by his father. It's a dangerous spot. He finds out why when he gets there, because the place is crawling with hyenas. They see the cub, and Simba's worst fears come true. The hyenas give chase and intend to eat him for lunch. They are about to move in for the kill. Simba turns on them and tries to roar, but only a squeak comes out. He is desperate. Then he tries again and this deep, full throated roar thunders out. You see the hyenas get this petrified look in their eyes, then they take off as fast as they can. It's only then that the camera turns and you see that the roar didn't come from Simba – it came from his father Mufasa, who had heard his first cry and rushed up behind him to rescue him.

My fears are like those hyenas, chasing me down. But my fears themselves are afraid -- afraid of something bigger, someONE bigger, who has my back. My father is behind me, guarding me. He hears my first cry, and comes rushing to my side. He is stronger than all my fears.

That's when the real transformation of fear happens, because fear changes from this dread of what's in front of us to respect and awe of who is behind us. We begin to fear God instead of our circumstances.

Proverbs 19:23

The fear of the LORD leads to life: Then one rests content, untouched by trouble.

In that sense, our fear isn't just conquered – it is redirected. We learn to trust the one who protects us so completely, who saves us absolutely. When we have made him our home, when we understand who he is and when we know how much he loves us, there is no longer any reason to be consumed by fear.

Psalm 27:1

The LORD is my light and my salvation -- whom shall I fear?

The LORD is the stronghold of my life -- of whom shall I be afraid?

The God who is in charge of the entire universe, who made everything in creation cannot be challenged by anything or anyone. He is victorious every time. There is no safer place to be than in the shadow of the Almighty.

Paul summed it up well:

Romans 8:31

What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us?

He then went on to say that we are more than conquerors. We don't have to be held in the grip of fear. We're more than conquerors. We don't have to be afraid – we're more than conquerors. We're sons and daughters of the Most High God. He is definitely for us. Who can possibly stand against us?

All of us get caught up short by fear. As we conclude this morning, take a moment to finish the following sentences

1. My biggest fear right now is....
3. I'm going to invest in God as my home by...
2. The promise I need most from God right now is...

The 8 promises are on the screen again. Where are you most needing to hear God's roar? He's your protector, your shelter, your fortress, and he's your Father. A thousand may fall at your side, but God will never leave you. And he's greater than all your fears.