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Just Breathe: Fear

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Newspaper columnist Ann Landers was once asked, "Out of all the thousands of letters you receive each month, what problem is most dominant in people's lives?" Her answer surprised me - "It's fear!" she replied without hesitation. "The one thing that keeps people from the life they dream of is fear. People live every day in fear. They're afraid of losing their wealth. They're afraid of losing their loved ones. They're afraid of being themselves. They're afraid of growing up and being responsible. They're afraid of life itself."

Let's have a little fun this morning. I'm going to give you the technical name of a fear, and you tell me what it's a fear of. If you know the answer simply shout it out. We'll start easy and get more challenging. Here we go:

Coulrophobia – fear of clowns

Brontophobia – fear of thunder

Xenophobia- fear of strangers

Alektorophobia – fear of chickens

Chionoandrophobia – fear of snowmen

Today we're finishing a worship series called "Just Breathe". We've been talking about building more margin in our lives, and that includes creating a bit more spaciousness in our heads and our hearts. Truth is, my head and my heart have been crowded with fear from a very early age. Fear of rejection. Fear of failure. Fear of appearing incompetent. And I thought it was just me. But over the years I've discovered that everyone wrestles with fear of one kind or another.

Have you ever noticed that when you're afraid your breathing gets shallow? Sometimes when we're in the grip of fear we discover that we're actually holding our breath! Well, today I'm going to invite us to gain a little perspective by breathing deeply of some good news from Scripture in the book of Joshua. Before I read it, let me set the context. Moses had led the Israelites out of their slavery in Egypt and for 40 years he shepherded them through the wilderness and to the Promised Land. But just as the Israelites came to the threshold of the Promised Land, Moses died, and God called a young man named Joshua to become the leader of

the Israelites. Now, imagine that you're Joshua. You're now responsible for the lives of thousands of people. You're about to cross into an unknown land that is filled with people who will see you as a threat. How are you feeling? Yeah, Joshua was feeling that way too! Now let's hear how God spoke into Joshua's fear in Joshua 1:2-9:

After the death of Moses the Lord's servant, the Lord spoke to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' assistant. He said, "Moses my servant is dead. Therefore, the time has come for you to lead these people, the Israelites, across the Jordan River into the land I am giving them. I promise you what I promised Moses: 'Wherever you set foot, you will be on land I have given you— from the Negev wilderness in the south to the Lebanon mountains in the north, from the Euphrates River in the east to the Mediterranean Sea in the west, including all the land of the Hittites.' No one will be able to stand against you as long as you live. For I will be with you as I was with Moses. I will not fail you or abandon you. Be strong and courageous, for you are the one who will lead these people to possess all the land I swore to their ancestors I would give them. Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the instructions Moses gave you. Do not deviate from them, turning either to the right or to the left. Then you will be successful in everything you do. Study this Book of Instruction continually. Meditate on it day and night so you will be sure to obey everything written in it. Only then will you prosper and succeed in all you do. This is my command—be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid or discouraged. For the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."

This is the Word of God for the people of God.
Thanks be to God!

Do you know what the most frequent command in Scripture is? It's "Do not be afraid." Rumor has it that it appears 365 times in the bible, one command for every day of the year. And that's awesome because many of us wrestle with fear every day. Certainly, Joshua was wrestling with fear on the day that God spoke to him. All that responsibility on his shoulders. All that uncertainty about what they would face in this new land. And what does God say to Joshua? "Do not be afraid or discouraged." There's that command! And that's

what God says to us over and over again throughout Scripture. Do not be afraid!

Now, maybe you're thinking to yourself, "Big deal. So God says 'do not be afraid'. Those are just words. What difference do they make? If I'm standing at the open door of an airplane at 20,000 feet with a parachute on my back, ready to make my first jump, I'm not real comforted by the instructor who says, 'Don't be afraid. It's no big deal.' All that does is make me ashamed of my fear. If that's what you're thinking you'd be right... except that God is about more than empty words when it comes to our fears. God also promises, "I will be with you." God said to Joshua, *"For I will be with you as I was with Moses. I will not fail you or abandon you... Do not be afraid or discouraged. For the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."*

One of my seminary professors, the great theologian, Joseph Sittler, once wrote this about how God responds to our fears. He said that when a small child cries out in the middle of the night because she is afraid of the dark it is the foolish parent who turns on the light, shows the child that there are no monsters in the closet or under the bed, and then turns out the light and tells the child there's nothing to be afraid of. It is the wise parent who climbs into bed with that child, wraps her in arms of love and comfort and whispers, "It's OK sweetheart. I'm right here."

Isn't that beautiful? And isn't it true that few things diminish our fear like knowing that we're not alone amid fear-filled situations? Scripture *never* tells us that there is nothing to fear in this world. Far from it. The Bible is painfully realistic about the gravity of life, about the multitude of things in this world that can and do cause us to fear. But into that gravity, into the darkness of our fears God doesn't just say, "Do not be afraid." God also says, "I will be with you."

I love the words of the Psalmist in chapter 139:7-12 when, speaking to God, wrote,
*I can never get away from Your presence!
If I go up to heaven, You are there;
if I go down to the grave, You are there.
If I ride the wings of the morning,*

*if I dwell by the farthest oceans,
even there Your hand will guide me,
and Your strength will support me.
I could ask the darkness to hide me
and the light around me to become night—
but even in darkness I cannot hide from You.*

Isn't that awesome? Most of us wonder from time to time where God is. We wonder if God is with us or somewhere else. But the promise we cling to is that we are never without God's presence. Ever.

While those words are comforting, they do raise the question, "How is God with us?" Well, one way that God is with us is through the presence of the Holy Spirit. When Jesus was physically present on this earth, he could only be in one place at a time, but through the Holy Spirit, the living presence of God is with us in every moment of life. And a second way that God is present with us is through the body of Christ, the church. Someone once said that it's great to know that God is with me but sometimes, I just need God with flesh on. That's so true, and this body of Christ is the living, breathing presence of God with us. Because God is with us through the Spirit and the Body of Christ, that suggests two simple yet powerful ways for us to practice the presence of God when we're struggling with fear.

First, **just breathe**. Be still and breathe deeply and slowly. That'll do two things. First, it'll calm your nervous system which is usually on high alert when we're struggling with fear. It's amazing how a few slow, deep breaths can bring us a sense of calm. Second, it'll remind you that the Spirit, the breath of God, is with you, within you, whispering, "Do not be afraid, for I am with you, and I love you."

Second, **deepen your engagement with your church community**. Get into a small group. Find a place to serve. Join a bible study. Allow your sisters and brothers in Christ to be God-in-flesh for you.

Years ago, I took a group of confirmation students to summer camp in order to build a sense of community. One of the activities we did was called "The Plunge". One student would step up on several increasingly tall poles that were stuck in the ground until they stood on the last pole, about six feet in the air. The rest of the students stood facing

one another and linked their arms making a human net. The student on the pole was then asked to turn around, close their eyes, cross their arms over their chest and, stiff as a board, fall backward into their classmates' arms.

It was an awesome activity. I took great sadistic pleasure at the sheer terror of those students, until the last student had gone, and they all looked at me and said, "It's your turn." I promptly gave them a litany of reasons for why I couldn't possibly do that. I was too big, too heavy, too old. I was the pastor. Of course, the truth was I was too scared, and I think they knew it because they didn't buy any of my excuses. They said that if we were there to build community, I had to learn to trust them too. What could I say to that? So, I walked up those poles...which looks so easy to do from the ground but is much harder when you're legs feel like jelly. I stood on that top pole, turned around, crossed my arms over my chest and froze there. I couldn't do it, until one young lady who had cried the whole way up the poles and took the plunge anyways said, "You can trust us. We love you." And I believed her. And so, I took the plunge. The freedom and terror of that little fall and of landing in their strong arms was amazing.

For some of us, engaging more deeply with community can feel like "The Plunge". It can feel risky to allow ourselves to be known. It can leave us feeling vulnerable. But I can tell you from experience that when you're wrestling with fear, few things help us to breathe easier than knowing that we are not alone.

Maybe you're here today and you're a mess of fear. Maybe you've recently received a diagnosis that has shaken you to the core, or maybe someone you love has, leaving your future uncertain. Maybe you're facing a financial crisis and see no way out. Or maybe you're in a relational crisis...the one you've laid all your hopes on is abandoning you or has betrayed you. Or perhaps you're wrestling with a demon called addiction and no matter how hard you try you can't seem to shake loose.

Whatever fear you're wrestling with know that you're not alone. Let every breath you take remind you that God is with you. And know that there are

people in this body of Christ who would welcome the opportunity to walk with you through whatever dark valley you're traveling.

So let's pause right now, and receive a deep breath. And as you inhale, say to yourself, "I release my worries and what-ifs." And as you exhale, say to yourself, "And I welcome your peace and holy possibilities."

Amen.