

## His Eye Is On the Sparrow

What are you afraid of?

- Dark
- Spiders
- Closed in places
- Getting lost
- Being picked on or bullied

(Ask kids and congregation)

What helps you feel safe when you are afraid?

- A hug
- A familiar place
- Reassuring words
- Taking precautions

(ask kids and congregation)

There are a lot of things to be afraid of in the world. Some of them are little things like spiders. Others are much larger, like the fear of war or terrorism. Some are things it makes sense to be afraid of. Those are the things everyone knows for sure will hurt you – things like fire or war. Others are things that to others make no sense at all. I'm not scared of spiders or snakes, so it's hard for me to understand people who are. But you may not understand my fear of roller coasters. In today's Bible story, Jesus talks a lot about what to be afraid of and what not to be afraid of.

He had just finished giving directions to his disciples about how to do something that was probably a little bit scary to them. After teaching them and showing them what to do, Jesus was getting ready to send them off on their own to spread the news about the kingdom of God that is on its way. So think about it. Jesus was sending them out together to knock on doors and talk to

strangers. He told them not to take anything with them, and depend on the people they would meet for whatever they needed. How many of you might be just a little bit scared to do that?

Beyond that, Jesus and the disciples both knew that the reception they got might not be friendly. There would be people who didn't like what they were doing. There would be people who would disagree with what they were saying. Some of those people would be people who had the power to put them in jail or worse. And some of those people were the people who they loved the best but who might not want anything to do with them because of what they were saying and doing. Yes, they had a good reason to be afraid.

There are things we have a good reason to be afraid of as well. The list you gave is a good starting point. If you had been given more time, I bet you could have come up with more. When we are afraid, our bodies change. There is an automatic response system that kicks in in the brain sending chemical and electrical signals to some parts of our body, pulling attention and energy from others. When the body sees something it is afraid of, the heart rate increases, breathing gets faster, quick energy is sent to our legs to run, to our hands to fight. The part of our body that works less well when we are afraid is our ability to think clearly and rationally. Emotions and instincts take over. It's an ancient response to an immediate threat.

That response is effective when there's a tiger coming at you and you have to either chuck a spear at it or run like anything to get away. It's less helpful when the thing you are afraid of is a situation that goes on for a long time for which there is no easy one-answer solution. The threat of attack from terrorism that began on 9-11 is one of those long-term, hard to solve fears. That is just one example. In the world we live in, many of our fears are like that, and so the stress and anxiety builds with no way to resolve it. Among other things, that means we distrust more easily, lash out in anger more easily and find it hard to

think clearly about many things because our fears and anxieties shape our reactions.

Jesus gives puts our fears in perspective. "Do not fear those who can kill the body but not the soul...Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your father. Even the hairs on your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows."

You step outside in the early morning and the voices of birds are everywhere. Just by listening, you can identify all their variety – the caw of the crow, the chirp of the sparrow, the call of the cardinal, the melodic trill of the mockingbird, the hawk's piercing cry. So many little creatures, each going on living its life, oblivious of the big picture, interested in eating and nesting and flying. Each one part of God's awareness, under God's care.

If God cares even for each bird, doesn't God care for you as well? Even in the middle of all the vast creation, God finds awareness and care of each one of God's creatures including you, so what do you have to be afraid of?

I've been visiting Laura Ryan recently. Laura is on hospice now, wearing down at age 97 but doing well. Beside her bed, as it has been many years, is a little card with these words on it. "His eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me." She says, "He's held me all these years. I am content with whatever happens, because I know he knows what's best for me."

As an aside, if God cares for each living creature, and especially for each human being, maybe we should be careful to show each other the same care and respect, valuing poor as well as rich, black as well as white, female as well as male, refugee as well as resident.

Beyond God's general, loving care, there remains the question of what it is we SHOULD be afraid of. So much of what we fear has to do with the safety of our bodies. We're afraid of falling, we're afraid of being hurt, we're afraid of pain. But Jesus points out that all of those are things that are relatively short

term. What is really important is the long-term well-being of our eternal soul. So it is how we live our lives the way God wants us to, the way Jesus showed us how to, that matters more than the pain we fear in the moment.

The disciples and the congregation Matthew wrote to were small and afraid, even as we are. They looked ahead, as we do, to the coming of God's kingdom of justice and mercy. Until that time, we need not fear those who destroy the body, for they cannot destroy the soul. Jesus asks us to keep on, to stay faithful, both because we love him and because in the end, all those fears will be wiped away in the coming of God's glory.

Tom Long writes that until then, there are three things the community of the faithful can be sure of: that the Holy Spirit will be present and never abandon us; that even if we suffer, our suffering will not be wasted because it bears witness to our faith; third, that even in the midst of hard times, we know that nothing can change God's good news or separate us from God's love. And if nothing, **neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, then what do we have to fear?**