
This sermon was preached at the opening and dedication service for our new Worship & Ministry Centre

But now ... Fear Not ... I am

by Rev. Robert Griffith

In chapter 42 of the Old Testament Book of Isaiah we see the people of God facing their worst-case scenario. They have completely missed the mark with God – they are blind and deaf to His Word and His guidance and God has turned His back on them in anger. But even in the midst of that devastating reality, God still provides a way out and those first words in chapter 43 which Bron read to us and which inspired the song we brought to you, tells us how we too can survive the toughest of circumstances.

What use is faith when the worst happens? The most important thing faith can do for us in the middle of a crisis is to teach us to listen. The verses Bron read us tell us what to listen for. Specifically, they tell us to listen for six words from God whenever we are overwhelmed by a worst case scenario. The first two words to listen for are the first two words in Isaiah 43; **"But now."**

With God there is always a **"But now "** The worst has happened. **But now** God wants to do a new thing in your life. The thing you feared most has overtaken you. **But now** God gives you a new perspective and a new promise. When the worst happens, faith always hears, **"But now "**

In Matthew chapter 8 we read of a man who has contracted leprosy. His facial features are slowly rotting away. His hands and feet end, not with fingers and toes, but useless stubs. His community has expelled him. His religion has condemned him. His family has abandoned him. **But now** he meets Jesus. And with two words, Jesus changes everything. For the leper, God's **"But now,"** becomes: "Be clean."

In Mark chapter 4 we read of the time the disciples cast off from the pier and begin to row across the familiar Galilean waters. Very soon the calm sea has begun to churn. The wind now lashes their faces with salt and spray. Then the storm descends with a vengeance. They are ankle deep in sea water and taking on more than they can bail. In minutes - perhaps seconds - they will capsize and sink. Their worst fears have become a reality. God's **"But now,"** for the disciples comes again in two words from Jesus when He says: "Be still." And it was still.

For every sickness, for every storm, for every defeat and loss or failure, for every disastrous flood, storm or tragedy - God has an answer. When the worst happens, faith always waits for God to say, **"But now."** The next two words faith listens for when the worst happens are in the middle part of verse 1 in Isaiah 43. ☺ **"Fear not."**

Judging from the response of people in the Bible who actually saw real angels, they were fearsome to behold. When they appeared, people usually fainted, fell face down on the ground or ran. So the first words angels usually spoke were, **"Fear not."** When the disciples saw Jesus walking on the water that time they thought He was a ghost, the disembodied spirit of some lost sailor stalking them across the waves. So Jesus had to tell them, **"Fear not."**

Why should we fear not? The answer follows those two words in vs. 1. **"Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine."**

God can say, "**Fear not,**" because God knows that He's going to be with us no matter what. That's what vs. 2 is about. *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned."*

God never tells us there won't high waters, raging rivers or blazing fires in our lives. He just says, *"When you are in the middle of those worst-case scenarios, fear not. I am with you."* No matter what happens, no matter what we do, God is going to be with us in the flood, with us in the fire, with us when the worst happens. So we can fear not, and faith listens for two more words. "**I am.**" Vs.3.

*"For **I am** the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour."* In the very next sentence in that verse God reminds us of Egypt. You may remember what God told Moses when he asked, *"Whom shall I say sent me?"* God told Moses, *"You tell Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, that **I Am** sent you."* All through Scripture God calls himself **I Am**. What does that mean?

Well if you look at the way the phrase "I am" is used throughout the Bible, you find that it's almost always connected not just to God's existence, but to God's action. In other words, when God says, "**I am,**" He means, *"I am here, I am active, I am what's happening."*

So how can hearing God say, "**I am,**" help us in our time of need? Here's how: When the worst happens we don't just lose our health or a loved one or a job or a home; we lose our identity. The tragedy is so overwhelming, the grief so all consuming, that it redefines us. Whether the worst comes crashing down on you through no fault of your own, or comes bursting out from within because of your own bad choices, the worst is overwhelming because you lose yourself.

That's when you need to listen with the ears of faith for the voice of God to say, "**I am.** *You may have lost everything, even who you are, but I am. I am here. I am what's happening. I am with you. I am your saviour – now and always!*"

In Psalm 46 God told his people, *"Be still, and know that I am God."* That same God, in the person of Jesus, told the winds and waves, *"Quiet! Be still."* He still has that power over the storms we face. No matter how big they are, no matter how often they come. Our worst days do not diminish God's power. Not one bit. Listen with faith and you will hear God speak those words: ☹ **But now ... Fear not ... I am.** And when God speaks, worlds are formed; new life is given; the old becomes new again!

But why? For what purpose? Trusting God to save us and rescue us from the floods and traumas of life is important but what are we saved for? Is it just so we wait around for the next crisis? Or are we saved for a purpose? Have we re-built this wonderful facility for its own sake? Was creating this space an end in itself or was this building saved for a purpose which is far greater than the building itself?

Well, Bron has already answered that question when she read the words of the Apostle Paul which he wrote to the Church at Philippi years ago. The reason God saves us from the floods and the fires of life; the reason God says, *"but now ... fear not ... I am"* is so He can lead us to embrace the same reality which gripped the heart of Paul when he wrote: *"... whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him."* (Phil. 3:7-9). Nothing else compares. Nothing else competes with that one goal. We are saved for a purpose and that purpose is to know Christ and to be found in Him. Everything else took second place for Paul.

My purpose and calling as a Minister of the gospel is to lead people into a personal, life-transforming relationship with the living Christ. I have no other calling. Everything else I do points to or flows from that one purpose. The same is true for the whole Christian Church. Everything which happens under the banner of the Church needs to point to or flow from the mission of Christ to reconcile all God's children to Himself. All the other great stuff which has crept on to the Church's agenda and re-defined its purpose needs to come second to our primary calling: to know Christ and to be found in Him.

People wonder why buildings like this are not full every week like they once were. People ask why the Church is declining and congregations are closing every day across our nation. The answer is simple: we have lost sight of our purpose. We have become distracted by countless other worthy causes. We have lost our first love and neglected our calling. We are called to know Christ and to be found in Him and the purpose of the Church is to lead people to Christ so they may know Him also and be found in Him. Everything else we do, preach or say must flow from that purpose and point people to Christ or we are not the Church Jesus birthed and promised to build.

So in the name of Jesus Christ, the author and perfecter of our faith, I want to declare that this new *Worship and Ministry Centre* will be a place where the risen, living Christ will be found. He will be present in our worship, present in our ministry and present in our fellowship. Everything which happens here will happen in Christ, through Christ and for Christ. Then, and only then, will God once again fill this place to overflowing as people are drawn to Jesus from across this region. That's what I signed up for. That's the only reason I am here.

I am proud of what I have been able to deliver in leading this project but I need to be brutally honest with you and say that if the mission of Christ is not front and centre in this building from this day forward then I have just presided over the greatest waste of money and time in my life, because this building will be empty in ten years if something doesn't happen to alter our current trajectory.

When the Church of Jesus Christ once again embraces its calling and purpose in the world, then the sleeping giant will awaken and all our buildings will be full to overflowing. Because religion and the institutional church is repelling and repulsing people more now than ever before. But Jesus Christ always draws people because deep down in their God-created soul of every person on this earth there is a desire to know Christ and to be found in Him.

19 months ago we were devastated by a near record flood ... but the voice of God was very clear to those who were listening: *"But now, fear not – you are not alone – I am with you – and I will now provide everything you need to transform this into a place where My Word is preached, My presence is sought, My Lordship is proclaimed, My gospel is celebrated and My mission is accomplished."*

That journey begins afresh today.