**Fearless Witnesses**

Isaiah 43:1-12

Listen to God’s Word again:

“But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: ‘Fear not, for I have redeemed you… Fear not, for I am with you…’” Isaiah 43:1,5

Repetition in Scripture is God’s highlighter - His way of saying, “don’t miss this.” ***Twice in this short section God speaks to His people these two powerful words: “Fear not.”*** It has often been pointed out that the most common command in the Bible is “Do not be afraid,” and that it occurs exactly **365 times** - meaning one for every day of the year. Do you think God may be trying to tell us something?

**Anxiety disorders** are more and more common these days:

“With 6.8 million Americans currently struggling with Generalized Anxiety Disorder, 6 million Americans with Panic Disorder, 15 million Americans with Social Anxiety Disorder, and 19 million Americans with Specific Phobia Disorder, anxiety is not going away any time soon.”

<https://www.banyanmentalhealth.com/2019/03/11/why-is-anxiety-so-common/#:~:text=Why%20Is%20Anxiety%20So%20Common%20in%20America%3F,and%20underreporting%20in%20the%20past>.

About 1 in 20 U.S. adults, ages 18 to 80, received a benzodiazepine prescription. This fraction rose with age, from about 3% among those 18 to 35, to 9% in those 65 to 80.

<https://newsinhealth.nih.gov/2015/02/many-older-people-take-anti-anxiety-meds-despite-risks#:~:text=NIH%2Dfunded%20researchers%20studied%20benzodiazepine,in%20those%2065%20to%2080>.

5% of U.S. adults take Xanax or the like. The number of people on benzo drugs increased dramatically during COVID - as it was ***a very anxiety producing situation*** and many people did not have the personal or social resources to handle the strain.

Now, lest we think this is a situation that doesn’t affect us here in our cozy little church, what if I told you that ***you HAD TO go share the gospel*** with someone before you go to bed tonight? How does that feel? How would you describe that tightness in the chest, that bead of sweat forming on your brow, that racing of the heart…? Ah… anxiety.

And let’s be honest, **what are we actually risking** when we share the gospel? Say you called a family member who isn’t walking with Jesus, or you walked over to chat with a neighbor or you texted an old friend from high school… ***what are you risking by saying***, “Hey, Jesus loves you, man!”

***Maybe they’ll think you’re a little weird.*** Maybe the relationship will be a little strained for a day or a week. Maybe that neighbor will tell a couple of other neighbors to watch out for the religious nut in that yellow house across the street… But what are the odds you lose your job or end up in jail? What are the odds you end up facing execution? Zero.

**Consider the days of Isaiah** - what the people legitimately had to fear: conquest, slavery, rape, torture, execution, abuse of your children in front of you, starvation, forced labor. Ancient warlike cultures were very creative in how they spread fear - and they were quite good at it. ***Assyria was one of the best at this fear-marketing***, which was why Jonah was so adamant to not go there. They didn’t deserve to hear about the love and mercy of Israel’s God! What if - heaven forbid - they repented and God forgave them! Can you imagine!

Fast forward to the **days of Jesus and the apostles** - what did they have to fear? John the Baptist was arrested - do you remember why? He confronted the local king for adultery. That’s it. He dared to tell a local politician not to sleep around. Can you imagine if that got you thrown in jail and then beheaded?

* Obviously **Jesus himself** was captured and killed.
* **Peter, James and John** were arrested and beaten.
* **Paul was often beaten** and even stoned a couple of times - which is generally not something you walk away from btw.
* **11 of the 12 apostles** were killed for their faith and John died in exile. They were 12 for 12 if you take Paul in place of John. Some were burned to death, others shot with arrows, others beheaded like Paul or crucified like Peter (upside down in his case).

***What did early Christians risk by saying “Jesus is Lord,”*** in the Roman Empire where everyone had to say, “Caesar is Lord”? They risked being fined, unable to buy and sell in the market, being arrested and - at some high points of persecution - being killed in public ways like being torn apart by lions in a gladiator arena.

***What about today?*** Open Doors says 360 million Christians face severe persecution for their faith right now. 5,621 Christians were murdered for their faith last year. 5,259 Christians were abducted last year.

We learned **a sad statistic** from Kristin’s parents recently. They meet with lots of pastors and missionaries in the middle east and north Africa. It has been well documented that thousands upon thousands of Muslims are becoming Christians - often through dreams and visions and miracles. But tragically, in places where they have done follow up on these “professions of faith,” they have found that around ***90% of those brand-new Christians go back to their Muslim faith*** and practice within a year. 90%. Why? Some are afraid to contact Christians to join a church. Some churches are afraid to welcome new converts because they are afraid of being betrayed. Many of these new believers hear the gospel through the internet or satellite television and simply can’t connect with believers near them. But the most common reason is **simply FEAR**. They are afraid of what it will actually cost them to follow Jesus.

And, again, let’s turn it back on ourselves: ***what keeps us from going to places like Pakistan*** and Libya, Somalia, Haiti or Afghanistan? We might call it “common sense” and practicality, but if we’re honest isn’t it just fear?

Isaiah 43 is very clearly written as an antidote to fear. So, let’s study the **four reasons** the prophet gives us not to fear and then apply that with three messages to boldly share about the Lord. First:

**Why not to Fear:**

1. God **Created** you for His glory

“But now thus says the LORD, who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: ‘Fear not.’” Isaiah 43:1

Now it’s obvious with Israel that ***God created and formed them as a nation***. By starting with Abraham - an old man without children - God made it very clear that only He could get credit for building them into a great nation that would endure through 4 millennia, often in times of extreme persecution and suffering.

Of course, ***this is just as true for the church!*** God took a ragtag band of 12 very average young men and used them to turn the Roman Empire upside down. This is true of Oakwood for our 40-year history - God created this local church, He formed it for His own glory.

And this is ***true for you as an individual***. God created you, He shaped you in your mother’s womb. He spoke you into being. And He did this for HIS OWN GLORY. Let’s be aware of how very American we are - and how 21st century we are! Every person is a custom snowflake waiting to unleash their personal glory on the world. ***We have become the ultimate culture of SELF-focus, self-advancement, self-glorification***. And people aren’t even embarrassed or shy about it anymore. Ours is the ME-first generation. Me, me, me. Not that I have to make a case for this statement - social media is all the proof you need. Enter the smartphone and almost immediately you end up with “social” platforms that allow people to “platform” themselves and “leverage their brand.” Oh, and what has that done to social anxiety? Through the roof!

So it is wildly counter-cultural to say that we were created by God and for God. We have to constantly remind ourselves and each other that it’s not about us, it’s all about Him. ***Is it any wonder that we struggle with anxiety*** when we constantly make everything about OURSELVES? But when we put God in His rightful place as Creator and Lord - our worries and fears fade away because we know He’s got us.

**Why not to Fear:**

1. God **Created** you for His glory

“Everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.” Isaiah 43:7

**You have a purpose** - and it’s not about you at all. It’s all about your Creator - the all-glorious sovereign ruler of all things. He made you - so don’t be afraid. What can mortal man do to you? If God is for us, who can be against us?

If we ***keep our ultimate purpose in perspective*** - that we exist for the glory of God not for our own happiness and fulfillment, it really mitigates the vast majority of our fears, which have to do with losing things related to our own happiness and fulfillment…

**Why not to Fear:**

1. God **Saved** you at His own expense

“Fear not, for I have redeemed you… I give Egypt as your ransom, Cush and Seba in exchange for you.” Isaiah 43:1,3

***God had just rescued Jerusalem from the Assyrian army*** - they came right up to the capital city and were turned back partly by in-fighting back home, and partly by threats from Egypt. Yes, it was a massive military setback to have 185,000 men slaughtered by God’s angel of death. That probably factored into their military planning. “Yeah, maybe let’s avoid the city that has angels with giant flaming swords…”

Sennecharib’s son, who helped assassinate dear old Dad, ***went on to conquer Egypt and Cush***, stretching the Assyrian Empire to its greatest dimensions. Seba could refer to another African nation like Ethiopia, or to an Arabian area like Sheba from which a queen came to see Solomon. Either would work as nations around Israel that were conquered instead of Israel.

But of course, ***the ultimate price God paid to save Israel*** and to save all of us was not other nations, but His own Son. And that’s the point here - God loved Israel so much that He paid the price for their redemption. And the same is true for us! So don’t be afraid! “If God did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all, how will He not also - along with Him - graciously give us ALL THINGS?”

**Why not to Fear:**

1. God **Called** you to belong to Him

“I have called you by name, you are mine… Because you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you…” Isaiah 43:1,4

God not only created you and saved you, ***He called you to Himself***. He set you apart to be with Him forever.

**I was not all that successful with the ladies as a teenager**. I know that’s hard to believe right now - I mean, who could resist THIS, right? But most of the girls I called (and it was not very many since I was a very big chicken) did not answer or respond well. They were not buying what I was selling.

I’m actually quite convinced that ***God kept me from meeting Kristin at first***. He gave me a little glimpse my sophomore year, but I didn’t see her again that whole year. She was like a beautiful woodland nymph the poor, weary traveler dreamed about but could never find. But then my junior year I saw her coming in slow motion across campus, I smoothly approached her and her friends and went right up to her with that time tested line: “Don’t I know you?” I proceeded to make three bad guesses but she did this magical little flick of the hair, probably to redirect my line of inquiry, and I was like, “Is your hair different? I like it…”

I was too cool for school, so ***I didn’t want to just call her on the telephone***, so I waited until I knew she’d be in the cafeteria line serving the potatoes and I asked her, all nonchalant and impressive, to join me in chapel that night since it was spiritual renewal week. I’m so spiritual. I saved her a seat up front on the right, but service started and she didn’t come. The songs ended - no Kristin. The service ended and she didn’t come. What did the speaker talk about that night? No idea whatsoever.

I walked out of the chapel all depressed and Charlie Brown - ***but then I saw her*** - waiting for me on the stairs. The clouds parted, the sun broke through, the angels sang the hallelujah chorus.

Kids, you don’t know how easy you have it with texting. When Kristin and I started dating in 1996, there was this new thing called the internet, but everyone thought it was a nuisance that wouldn’t do much good. So, when you were interested in a girl ***you had to actually pick up this old device called a PHONE*** that was hooked into the wall with a wire that went up in the air and connected into a grid… you get the point. You had to CALL and hope she would answer.

In my case, thanks only to the grace of God and the mysterious nature of women, **Kristin answered when I called**. Two years later, when I got down on one knee and asked her to marry me, in another miracle, she said yes. And here we are, 24 years later - more thankful than ever that the Lord brought us together.

The most amazing thing of all, brothers and sisters, is that ***God looked out across time and He saw you and me and He called us*** to belong to Him. He chose us - more than that, He created us so that He could choose us and call us to be His own. When is the last time you thanked God for that miracle of grace, that He chose you? He called you and you heard His voice and came running.

***So don’t be afraid.*** If God created you, saved you, chose you and called you - what in the world is there to be afraid of? I mean, what is the absolute worst that could happen? You could be tortured and killed. Your loved ones could be taken and tortured and killed. And then…? You’re all back together and with Jesus forever.

Here is the truth for us to hold onto in these last days - ***our enemy cannot hurt us, he can only send us home***. Oh, he can hurt these fragile old bodies and he can kill them - but that doesn’t touch the real us. That can’t affect our eternity. And that’s our last reason not to be afraid:

**Why not to Fear:**

1. God will **Protect** you no matter what

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you.” Isaiah 43:2

What a comforting promise this must have been for the Jews! Passing through waters is a reminder of **the parting of the Red Sea** - the time when Israel was most vulnerable in their escape from Egypt. Their backs to the water, the Egyptian army charging at them - nowhere to go, no army to protect them. ***Do you remember what God did?***

Oh, we remember the parting of the sea and the Israelites going through on dry ground. But do you remember ***what happened before that?***

**“**Then the angel of God who was going before the host of Israel moved and went behind them, and the pillar of cloud moved from before them and stood behind them, coming between the host of Egypt and the host of Israel. And there was the cloud and the darkness. And it lit up the night without one coming near the other all night.” Exodus 14:19-20

God graciously appeared before His people as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night - so they would tangibly see that He was really with them. So that sign of **God’s presence STOOD BETWEEN the Israelites and their enemies**. God Himself stepped into that space, going toe to toe with the Egyptian army and with Pharaoh and basically giving them the Clint Eastwood - “Ya feeling lucky, punk? Well, are ya?”

Turned out Pharaoh was feeling lucky and sent his whole army after the Israelites, only to be swallowed up by the Red Sea. But the visual here is that God placed Himself between His people and the danger. ***It’s like a kid is getting bullied on the playground*** and then his big brother walks over, coming up to the group of bullies and saying, “If you want to mess with my little brother, you have to go through me.”

Or fast forward to the **time of Daniel**, when the Jews were in exile in Babylon.

**Why not to Fear:**

1. God will **Protect** you no matter what

“When you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.” Isaiah 43:2

Consider what this promise meant to Daniel’s buddies, Shadraq, Meshach and Abednego. The Narcicist King Nebuchadnezzar built a giant statue of himself and demanded that everyone worship it / him. The three Jews refused and he ordered that they be thrown into the fiery furnace. Remember what happened then?

Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up in haste. He declared to his counselors, “Did we not cast three men bound into the fire?” They answered and said to the king, “True, O king.” He answered and said, “But I see four men unbound, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods.” Daniel 3:24-25

When His people were literally IN THE FIRE, **God stepped into the fire WITH THEM**. In all likelihood this was Jesus Himself taking a human form just a few centuries before he would get his fully human body. But God’s presence with them in the fire, just like His presence with Daniel in the lion’s den - provided the protection they needed.

I fully expect Shadraq, Meshach and Abednego ***knew Isaiah 43 and may well have been reciting it*** to each other in the moments leading up to their ordeal. They couldn’t be sure that God would keep them alive physically, but they knew He would protect them spiritually even if their bodies died. You’ve got to love their defiance of the king’s order:

“Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.” Daniel 3:17-18

They knew for sure that they could not bow down to and worship any God but the Lord - so that decision was simple if not easy. ***They knew God was ABLE to save them***. But the beauty of their faith-filled defiance was that ***they did not know if God would ACTUALLY save them*** - but that made no difference to their obedience and allegiance.

May the same be said of us! Look back in Isaiah 43:

**Why not to Fear:**

1. God will **Protect** you no matter what

“When you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.” Isaiah 43:2

Primarily and ultimately this means **the fire of God’s judgment** - spiritual fire - will not burn us, will not consume us, because Jesus already stepped into that fiery furnace on our behalf. But it also applies to trials and suffering, which the Bible often compares to refiner’s fire. To purify gold or silver you have to heat it up and melt it down, then skim off the impurities. So it is with us. It takes heat and pressure, stress and suffering, to purify our lack of faith, our worldliness, our stubbornness and sin. But in the end, the fire of purification is just that - it cleanses us and sanctifies us - it does not hurt us, it makes us better. A friend of mine in a wheelchair used to say, ***“Suffering will either make you bitter or make you better; it won’t leave you the same.”***

So here is our summary so far:

**Why not to Fear:**

1. God **Created** you for His glory
2. God **Saved** you at His own expense
3. God **Called** you to belong to Him
4. God will **Protect** you no matter what

Let’s apply this to Oakwood - and move forward in fearless faith. Let’s apply this to ourselves and our families - and trust God no matter what struggles or trials we are facing. And let’s apply this to our ministry and outreach. ***FEAR should not be the thing that keeps us from sharing the gospel*** or going on a mission trip or stepping out to serve someone. Gratitude and joy in the Lord should propel us into obedience, service and outreach! And that’s our application for this morning:

**What to Share:**

1. God is **Real** - His name is Jesus

“Let them bring their witnesses… You are my witnesses… and my servant whom I have chosen.” Isaiah 43:9-10

***Isaiah is super sarcastic about idols.*** He loves to make fun of people who make and worship idols - pointing out how ridiculous it is to chop up some wood, cook dinner over half of it and then shape the other half into a statue that you bow down and worship. Why would you think there is any power in a block of wood you just chopped up and burned up?

And Isaiah loves to ***challenge other gods and other nations to make a prediction*** - “You think your gods are so smart? Ok, have them predict one thing in the future and make it come true. You can’t even manage a single valid prophecy!”

That’s what he’s saying here - “Ok, nations, bring out your witnesses. What did your gods predict? How did they follow through? They said nothing (because they cannot speak) and they did nothing (because they cannot act). You are worshiping stones and blocks of wood. Morons.” (Ok, the word “morons” is not in the Bible but that is definitely what Isaiah’s tone conveys.)

**What to Share:**

1. God is **Real** - His name is Jesus

“You are my witnesses… that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed…” Isaiah 43:10

This is our message - ***there is only One God*** - the One who spoke and who acted as recorded in the Bible. Anyone or anything else that presents itself as a god is a falsehood and pretender - don’t be taken in.

**What to Share:**

1. God is **Real** - His name is Jesus

“I, I am the LORD, and besides me there is no savior.” Isaiah 43:11

This is how God made Himself known to Moses - ***as the Great I am*** - the God who is. Yahweh, the covenant name of God, the Lord, is a play on the phrase “I am” in Hebrew. And the whole point of the Exodus and the Passover was that the Lord, the God of Israel, is the God of salvation; the God of deliverance; the God of freedom and life.

And at the center of the Law of Moses is **the Great Shema** - “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.” In other words, there is only One God - our God - the Creator, the Lord who made a covenant with Abraham and Moses and later David.

And this is the God who sent His only Son to be born of the virgin (as foretold by Isaiah 700 years before it happened), to be born in Bethlehem (predicted by the prophet Micah also 700 years before Jesus was born), and to die as a sacrificial offering for sin (as prophesied in Isaiah 53). Those are just ***three of the 300+ specific prophecies*** in the Old Testament that were fulfilled in the life of Jesus. So our calling is very simply and very boldly to share that God is real - and His name is Jesus. Second:

**What to Share:**

1. God is **Faithful** and **Powerful**

“I declared and saved and proclaimed… and you are my witnesses… and I am God.” Isaiah 43:12

***The Bible is the documentation of what God spoke and what God did.*** Granted, we just have Moses’ word for it that God is the One who spoke the words, “Let there be light, and there was light.” But most of the other prophecies were spoken and recorded in real time, protected and preserved by the Jews through the centuries and then presented as evidence that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is the one true God.

**The nation of Israel exists** - still to this very day - as a testament to the faithfulness of God. God promised to always preserve a remnant in Israel, and He has. In spite of many concerted efforts to defeat and scatter the Jews, they have always survived and - based on the sovereign faithfulness of God - they always will.

The Jews were the chosen witnesses of God to testify before all the nations that their God is the true God. Now, for the most part they did not do a very good job of representing God. But God still preserved them because of His own goodness and mercy and faithfulness.

Significantly, **Jesus shifted this commission to his disciples and the early church** in Acts 1:8 when he said, “The Holy Spirit will come on you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.” Notice the specific things we are called to testify about:

**What to Share:**

1. God is **Faithful** and **Powerful**

“Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters.” Isaiah 43:16

***All Israel had to do was tell their story.*** We were slaves in Egypt - God set us free. How? He split the Red Sea in half and we walked right through it with a wall of water on our left and on our right. Then, when all of our 2 million plus people were through, the Egyptians came charging after us and the waters crashed back upon them and killed them all. So God saved us from slavery in Egypt!

***Don’t YOU have a story like that?*** You were a slave to your sin - but God paid the price in Jesus’ blood to set you free from that sin!

**What to Share:**

1. God is **Faithful** and **Powerful**

“I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert… I give water in the wilderness…” Isaiah 43:19-20

***God provided for Israel for 40 years in the wilderness*** - bringing water from a rock, providing manna and quail - time after time, without fail. And that foreshadowed the LIVING WATER Jesus would provide in Himself and His Holy Spirit. Water we can drink and never thirst again, because it satisfies our SOULS, not just our bodies.

***Don’t you have a story like that?*** You were digging in the dirt and sand of this world, but nothing would satisfy - nothing would fill you up… Until JESUS - then you drank of the water of life and found in it - found in HIM - everything you ever wanted or needed! One more part of our message:

**What to Share:**

1. God is **Worthy** of our worship and devotion

“The people whom I formed for myself, that they might declare my praise.” Isaiah 43:21

***God chose Israel as a sign to the whole world of how He loves His people*** - “The Lord, the Lord, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” Israel was founded by an elderly, infertile couple. It grew in a foreign land, the incubator of Egypt - and was led out with wonders and signs. The nation was preserved through the wilderness wanderings and then enabled to conquer the promised land against all odds. And throughout the ages the Jews have been preserved in spite of their continual rebellion and idolatry.

Yet through all of their ups and downs, God was faithful, God was consistent, God was merciful and gracious. Why? To give His people a reason to sing, to worship, to give thanks.

***Don’t you have a story like that?*** God has stuck with you through all of your ups and downs. He has been with you in your moments of obedience and commitment but also in your times of selfishness and sin. He has never abandoned you or walked away - but has always taken you back and given you a second chance, a third chance, a 300th chance. Why? To give you 300 reasons, 3000 reasons to sing His praises and tell others about Him.

Let’s remember not to be afraid, but to boldly stand up as witnesses for our amazing, faithful, powerful, glorious God!

Let’s pray.