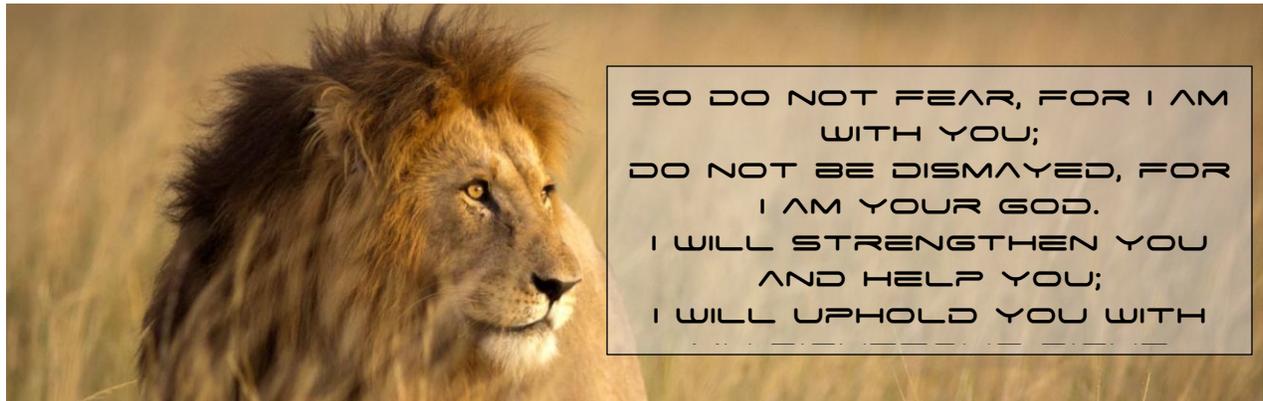


December 28, 2020



Dear Atwater Baptist Church,

With apologies to Mac Davis, I think many of us have been saying that we think "*Happiness will be 2020 in my rearview mirror.*" Just think of all the events that have negatively impacted our world in this calendar year -

- Kobe Bryant died
- We had massive wildfires in Australia
- There was an Impeachment trial in the US Senate
- Brexit - Britain exited the European Common Market
- Megxit - Prince Harry and Meghan Markle exited the Royal Family
- Covid-19

And that was just January. Add to this the America's own west coast fires, massive toilet paper shortages, a record stock market plunge, the Boy Scouts of America filing bankruptcy, the 2020 Tokyo Olympics were postponed, professional and college sports disruption, and several high-profile police conflicts led to widespread looting and rioting. And Murder Hornets. Don't forget the Murder Hornets. What a year to endure!

Every year, Merriam-Webster, the dictionary people, select a "Word of the Year" based on the number of people who go online to search for its definition. From their press release, "Sometimes a single word defines an era, and it's fitting that in this exceptional—and exceptionally difficult—year, a single word came immediately to the fore as we examined the data that determines what our Word of the Year will be. Based upon a statistical analysis of words that are looked up in extremely high numbers in our online dictionary while also showing a significant year-over-year increase in

traffic, Merriam-Webster's Word of the Year for 2020 is *pandemic*." The word alone has proven to strike fear into the hearts of many. (An interesting side statistic shows that lookups of the word "malarkey" made their top ten list of words people wanted to research.)

A similar survey is accomplished each year by a company that has an online Bible search app. *YouVersion* issued a press release from which I quote, "In a year marked by uncertainty and turmoil, more people than ever turned to the Bible for hope. In fact, the YouVersion Community completed nearly 600 million searches within the app in 2020, an 80% increase over the previous year. In mid-March as COVID-19 accelerated, the number one search term was "fear." This has been a challenging year with many people facing **devastating loss, loneliness, and fear**. With record-breaking levels of Bible engagement in the app this year, the 2020 YouVersion Verse of the Year is Isaiah 41:10: "*Don't be afraid, for I am with you. Don't be discouraged, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you. I will hold you up with my victorious right hand.*"

Devastating Loss. Loneliness. Fear. Taken to an extreme, a fear can be classified as a phobia. Defined as "an extreme or irrational fear of or aversion to something," a phobia has been described as "an irrational fear of something that's unlikely to cause harm."

You're familiar with some of the more common phobias, claustrophobia – fear of enclosed spaces, arachnophobia – fear of spiders, acrophobia – fear of heights. There are actually a couple of fears or "phobias" that might come into our vocabulary as we try to make sense of the year's events. Fears that kind of make sense, and fears that God is careful to acknowledge and address.

Athazagoraphobia (say that fast three times!) is "the fear of being forgotten, ignored, or abandoned." Two related phobias are *autophobia*, the fear of being lonely, and *monophobia*, the fear of being alone. Being alone, even in a usually comforting place like home, can result in severe anxiety for people with this condition. People with *autophobia* feel they need another person or other people around in order to feel safe.

Some of these feeling make perfect sense to us who realize that God designed mankind to be in community – with Himself and with each other. It

is unnatural and disconcerting for us to be alone. A child is often comforted by simply knowing that a parent is nearby.

This is why God says that the very reason that we should not be afraid is that *He is with us*. At Christmastime we are reminded that the arrival of Jesus was foretold in the Old Testament with these words in Matthew's Gospel, "*So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, 'Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,' which is translated, 'God with us.'*" (Interestingly enough, Matthew concludes his gospel with the same theme – "*Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Amen.*"

The author of Hebrews likewise links "I will not fear" (and "I will be content") with God's never-failing presence. In Hebrews 13:5,6 we read, "*Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.'*" So we may boldly say: "*The LORD is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?*"

What is it about the assurance that God will never leave us nor forsake us that allows us to be content with what we have and absent of fear? God knows that when we are consciously aware of His presence that our anxieties and fears will diminish. God made us that way, and throughout the Bible goes out of His way to remind us of His never-failing faithful presence with us.

2020 is in our rearview mirror. 2021 has no guarantee of being any better. But whatever may come our way, remember the words of the psalmist, "*Whenever I am afraid, I will trust in You. In God I have put my trust; I will not fear. What can flesh do to me?*"

Grace and Peace!
Steve Bills
Executive Minister
American Baptist Churches of the Central Pacific Coast