



“FEARING WELL”

SCRIPTURE: PSALM 27: 1, 4-9

GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
Sunday, January 22, 2023, Ordination/Installation of Elders and
Deacons

The Rev. Dr. Marcia Whitney Mount Shoop, Pastor

Psalm 27:1, 4-9

27:1 The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

27:4 One thing I asked of the Lord, that I will seek after: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in God’s temple.

27:5 For God will hide me in God’s shelter in the day of trouble; God will conceal me under the cover of God’s tent: God will set me high on a rock.

27:6 Now my head is lifted up above my enemies all around me, and I will offer in God’s tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and make melody to the Lord.

27:7 Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me!

27:8 "Come," my heart says, "seek God’s face!" Your face, Lord, do I seek.

27:9 Do not hide your face from me. Do not turn your servant away in anger, you who have been my help. Do not cast me off, do not forsake me, O God of my salvation!

The Word of the LORD.

ALL: THANKS BE TO GOD.

The power of the psalms in Hebrew Scripture is in their capacity to speak the truth of human experience across context and generation.

They speak this truth in a way that is both utterly personal and undeniably collective and shared.

We don't know the person's identity or context. But we can recognize the feelings. We can feel time collapse—and the contours of faith and fear can come alive for us.

Best case scenario is that the Psalmist helps us see ourselves and each other more clearly, more compassionately, more courageously. Best case scenario is that the psalmist supports us in our own work to position our faith and fear in a relationship to each other in a way that means we are fearing well together.

This psalmist begins with the praise and assurance of God's strong presence and even protection in times of trouble.

And then the psalm shifts into a space of crying out, maybe even fearfully, after all these strong words and assurances. "Answer me when I cry out, God." "Don't hide your face from me." "Do not turn me away in anger, do not forsake me."

The psalmist knows God's presence changes the way fear impacts life—at the same time, the psalmist still feels fear—even about the very God who empowers this person to have a different relationship with fear.

That's the thing about fear and faith—they don't cancel each other out, but without being truthful about your fear and your faith, if their relationship gets skewed or out of balance, either one can scramble our capacity to be in proper relationship to both our faith and our fear.

God's presence, God's protection does not keep you from harm, but is a way that the harm does not destroy your soul, your spirit, your will. It can embolden you and humble you all at once.

When fear and faith interact with each other in ways that truly free us up to be God's people in the world, fear does not disappear, in fact we have to get close enough to it, we have to be curious with it, to understand what it is that we actually fear and who or what it is that we actually have faith in.

Fear is an embodied experience that sets off a series of body signals about organizing our thoughts and our behaviors. Fear is often anticipatory—about all the terrible things that are going to happen if we don't do something different. Fear is not just a feeling, it's a full bodied experience and its goal is protection and self-preservation.

So, it is a practiced art to have some curiosity in that experience of fear—what is the real danger here, what is it that I am afraid of.

Fear is an important messaging system—it's a false expectation to think we should erase it from our experience. The key is how we're able to befriend our fears so we can really get to know what they are all about. If we can actually know the source of our fear, then maybe we don't go fighting the battle that is actually not addressing the possibility we fear the most.

Three portraits of fear:

Portrait One: Ron Desantis

The second term Governor of the State of Florida, who is probably going to run for President in 2024. He's very adept at peddling fear to justify his fight against things like critical race theory and diversity and inclusion policies.

Take a look:

Play DeSantis Video (2:12)

Fear that tries to erase the thing that feels like a threat. Fear that uses intimidation and insult, erasure and accusation to push away what the fear is really about.

Show Graphic of the accusations against the AP African American class

Here is what the FL Board of Education says is the problem with this class.

CONCERNS FOUND WITHIN COLLEGE BOARD'S SUBMITTED AP AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDIES COURSE

TOPICS FROM AP COURSE	CONCERN
Topic 4.15 Intersectionality and Activism	<p>Intersectionality is foundational to CRT, and ranks people based on their race, wealth, gender and sexual orientation.</p> <p>INCLUDED READING:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kimberle Crenshaw – Known as the “founder” of intersectionality, co-editor of <i>Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement</i> • Angela Davis – self-avowed Communist and Marxist
Topic 4.19 Black Queer Studies	<p>INCLUDED READING:</p> <p>Roderick Ferguson - who exclaims, “We have to encourage and develop practices whereby queerness isn’t a surrender to the status quos of race, class, gender and sexuality. It means building forms of queerness that reject the given realities of the government and the market.”</p>
Topic 4.29 Movements for Black Lives	<p>Movement for Black Lives is an organization with stated objectives that include eliminating prisons and jails, ending pretrial detention, and concluding “the war on Black trans, queer, gender non-conforming, and intersex people.”</p> <p>INCLUDED READING:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leslie Kay Jones who wrote, “Every day, black people produce an unquantifiable amount of content for the same social media corporations that reproduce the white supremacist superstructures that oppress us.”
Topic 4.16 Black Feminist Literary Thought	<p>INCLUDED READING:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bell Hooks – Author of many intersectionality texts, and in the recommended reading states “I began to use the phrase in my work ‘white supremacist capitalist patriarchy’ because I wanted to have some language that would actually remind us continually of the interlocking systems of domination that define our reality.”
Topic 4.30 The Reparations Movement	<p>All points and resources in this study advocate for reparations. There is no critical perspective or balancing opinion in this lesson.</p>
Topic 4.31 Black Study and Black Struggle in the 21st Century	<p>INCLUDED READING:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Robin D.G. Kelley argues that activism, rather than the university system, is the catalyst for social transformation. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Kelley’s first book was a study of Black communists in Alabama. o Kelley warns that simply establishing safe spaces and renaming campus buildings does nothing to overthrow capitalism.



What's going on here? How is fear being dealt with? What is the cost? And what is DeSantis really protecting?

In DeSantis' world, fear is the catalyst to crack down, censor, and declare war on the straw man he calls "woke." He is calling us to our basest reactivity.

Portrait Two: Fannie Lou Hamer

A Mississippian during the Civil Rights Movement who risked her life for the right to vote, for the right to be a "first class citizen."

Play Fannie Lou Hamer Risked Her Life Video (4:33)

Fannie Lou Hamer feared accepting a world that dehumanized her and her community, her family. Accepting that world was a fate worse than death. Her faith looked at her fear and said what are you telling me I can do, what are you telling me I need to do?

What's going on here? How is fear being dealt with? What is the cost? And what is Fannie Lou Hamer protecting?

In Fannie Lou Hamer's world, fear is a catalyst to stand up, to speak up, and to ask this country to be who we claim to be. She was calling us to our highest aspirations.

Portrait Three: Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church

If we were to write a psalm today about the ways our faith and our fears are in conversation with each other, I would hear a lot of resonance with the psalmist of old. God is here, God is giving us courage, humility, and boldness to face our fears, to inquire into their character, into their content.

In so many ways, Grace Covenant, we are facing fears—even befriending them so that we can begin to disrupt our habits of protecting the things that don't need protecting—the things that have been keeping us stuck in fear, in avoidance, in aversion—the ones that keep us from trusting the kind of protection that God gives us, the kind of protection that frees us up to find truly liberating ways to be human together.

Fear is not where we stop—it's where we go deeper so that we can practice the faith of the psalmist, the faith of Fannie Lou Hamer, the faith on display every day at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church.

I am here, everyday, immersed in conversation and collaboration and good work with so many of you. I see you every day showing up and facing your fears so that your fears aren't in the driver's seat of your life, so that your faith and your fear can be in a balanced relationship. We are learning together how our faith is strengthened when we face our fears and we find out what we're really afraid of.

Show GCPC Pictures

- **PRIDE**
- **Boundaries Class**
- **Worship Council**
- **Reed and Amy Kim**
- **Long Range Vision**
- **Marcia and Richard**
- **Christmas Eve**
- **Revelation**
- **Youth at Midnight Manna**
- **20s30s at Pumpkin Carving**
- **Session Deacon Retreat**
- **Elders making a video**

Just in the last few months—I have seen so many moments of you, Grace Covenant, engaging rather than withdrawing. Facing fears and trusting God can be hard at times, but showing up is sometimes the most important step toward getting in right relationship with your faith and your fear and with yourself and with the world.

Just this last week I was in meetings of the Serve Council, Finance Council, the Session Deacon retreat, staff meetings, Just Funding meeting, Bible Study— all of them were spaces where we leaned into some fears, some aversions, some things that in the past had stopped us in our tracks. But they don't stop us, they move us to go deeper, to trust that God is teaching us, showing us the way to a world that isn't destroying itself to protect itself from the change we really need to be.

What's going on here? How is fear being dealt with? What is the cost? And what is GCPC protecting?

Show Picture of Fannie Lou Hamer singing at the March Against Fear 1966

GCPC, together we can be more like Fannie Lou Hamer than Ron DeSantis.

We can feel our fears, but our fears do not have to become a weapon to diminish others.

Take picture of Fannie Lou Hamer down.

Ron DeSantis says CRT teaches kids to hate themselves because they are white. Ironically, Ron DeSantis' fear of dealing with whiteness is keeping white people from learning the truth so white people can actually learn to really love themselves—and not base their identity and feigned self-worth on the lie of superiority.

Anyone who bases their feelings of worth on someone else being less than them is teetering on the edge of a dangerous proposition. Because the real fear is of their own inferiority.

If we could face our fear of inferiority by way of demythologizing superiority, we would all be so much better off. And learning about our true history wouldn't feel so scary after all.

We get a lot of practice GCPC—with the muscles we need to face our fears—we get it at GCPC in things that are not as high stakes as voting rights and censorship and state sanctioned terror. We get it in things like the sanctuary renovation, we get it in learning how to adapt to the different ways our building is being used since COVID, we get it in being honest about the discomfort we feel when we don't feel competent about a new thing we're being asked to try.

These are the muscles, the spiritual skills the world needs from us, Grace Covenant. And we'll never strengthen those muscles if they don't get worked sometimes. Not only can we do this, but we are doing it. That way we can do it in the world in the higher stakes situations like voting rights, censorship, and state sanctioned terror.

We have some remarkable models in our midst.

Outgoing officers (ask them to stand if they are present) were ordained in February 2020—just a month later COVID hit. Their entire service at Grace Covenant has been during COVID times. They have had to adapt, they have had to make decision with utterly no precedent, no map, no formula of the past—these who you called into service under very different conditions rose to the occasion and faithfully met the challenges—and they did it for you, for us, for God's kingdom—they did it when it was hard and scary and when it didn't win them a lot of praise.

Today we ordain and install a new class of elders and deacons—we have no idea what lies ahead, but one thing is for sure—the GCPC that we know today will not be the GCPC that exists when they complete their three year terms. That's because that's the way the world works. The only way things could stay the way they are now is if we cease to exist today.

And as long as I can breathe and I am your pastor, and the Head of Staff and the Moderator of the Session and the Chief Administrator of this community—I will not stop inviting you to join me in facing the fears that threaten to keep us stuck.

A God that promises to be with us and who tells us we don't need to fear the things we think we need to fear—that's the God who is right here, Grace Covenant. Right here in the ways we are growing, in the ways we are being transformed, in the ways we are being tested and challenged, in the ways we are finding our way through the pain, the grief, the fear.

It's ok to be afraid. When we feel fear that usually means we need to call in some reinforcements—we call on the name of the Lord. We call on our siblings in Christ, we call on our deepest capacity to trust a God we are still learning about, we are still getting to know.

I see you facing your fears, Grace Covenant, saying them outloud, trusting your community enough to tell the truth about how you are feeling. Thank you! And now, how do we invite our fears to remember they are not in the driver seat that will get us to the future God is calling us toward. Maybe for some of us they could move over to the passenger seat. Maybe for some their ready to get in the back seat. Maybe some are ready to put them in the trunk, and maybe some are ready to leave them behind. If faith is in the driver's seat, I trust your fear is where it needs to be right now.

And we are finding our way together to fearing well.

Thanks be to God.