We live in a world of uncertainty. We look around and see potential disaster at every turn. With layoffs at work, economics slow-downs, upswings in global warming and potential terrorist threats by Al-Qaeda, all of our struggles begin with the word, terror, or fear. We fear being sued or finishing last or failing at our jobs, or losing our families, or getting cancer. We fear going broke and getting older. We try to cope with our fears by financial investment plans or sophisticated military defense systems and yet our generation is addicted to more mood-altering drugs than any generation in the history of the world. Even our children feel stressed. Do you know that a child today has the same anxiety level of a psychiatric patient in the 1950’s?

Fear dampens creativity. Fear makes peace treaties between nations impossible. Courage did these things. Faith did these things. Hope did. Fear imprisons us and locks the door. Wouldn’t you like to escape to freedom? Can you imagine a life without fear? If I could remove from you every shaving of dread, insecurity, doubt—if you were free from every shiver of fear—how would your day be different than today? Would you be a different type of spouse or parent? Would you sleep better? Would you laugh more? Can you imagine your life with less fear?

This is the promise behind the question that Jesus asked His disciples. In a story found in the gospels of Matthew and Mark, Jesus asks His disciples this question: “Now why are you afraid?” It seems so self-evident, it would be like asking a swimmer: “Now, why are you wet?” Because the disciples are in a boat on the Sea of Galilee in a raging storm. The Sea of Galilee, for being such a famous body of water, is really not that big. It’s a big lake more than it is a sea. And yet the topography of the Sea of Galilee allowed the winds that blew off the Golan Heights to turn the sea into a “mountain range” of white water. Sometimes those violent storms would last for as much as three days. So if you were caught out in a storm on the Sea of Galilee, you had reason to be afraid. The waves could reach a height of ten feet. The disciples were in a thirty-foot-long fishing boat. There were seasoned sailors like Peter and landlubbers like Matthew. Both were wondering, “What in the world have we gotten ourselves into?” According to the story, Jesus had actually told them to get into the boat. It was His idea. As Matthew recounts the story of the storm in Matthew chapter eight, he uses some interesting language, v. 34: “Jesus got into a boat, and His followers went with Him, and a great storm arose on the lake, so that the waves covered the boat. Matthew uses an interesting word for storm. Matthew bypasses the usual words for storm and uses the word seismos. He remembers the storm as more than a rainstorm but a shaking of the earth. He only uses this word two other times in this gospel, once to describe how the earth shook when Jesus was crucified, another time to describe how the earth shook when Christ rose from the dead. So we see the shaking of the earth at the defeat of sin, the shaking of the earth at the defeat of death, and the shaking of the earth at the defeat of fear.”
Some storms are sudden, some you can see coming for days. Sometimes fear jumps out at you in the form of a phone call when a loved one has been taken in death. Fear can come out of nowhere. That’s how it came to the disciples. The disciples turned to Jesus for help. When they turned to Christ, Jesus was asleep. Sound asleep! Thunder roars, Jesus snores. The gospel of Mark, he re-tells the story: Mark 4:38. “In the stern, asleep on a pillow.” In the boats used in the days of Jesus, many of these boats had a platform on the stern—a place to put the fishing nets, or store them beneath. It was the only protective place. That was the only place. Jesus was on a pillow (leather pillow-ballast bag to steady the boat). This was a pre-meditated slumber. Why? Do you think Jesus knew a storm was coming? Yes. He was not afraid. The storm that struck fear in the hearts of the disciples struck no fear in the heart of the Master. And when He fell asleep, and the storm came, and the disciples had to wake Him up, they were a bit perturbed. According to Mark, they asked Him a question: “Teacher, don’t you care that we are about to perish?” They do not say “Teacher, have you ever seen a storm like this?” or “Teacher, do you have any way to get us out of this problem?” They don’t question Christ’s ability—but His integrity.

Fear causes us to question the character of God. When we find ourselves suffering with sickness or facing tragedy, we question God’s goodness or faithfulness. We ask “where is God” when we have children who don’t respect us or parents who don’t understand us. Fear causes us to become control freaks. Implicit in this question, “Teacher, don’t you care?” is a command, “Fix it!” “Do something about this!” We lose our respectfulness and reverence for God, because fear, at its core, is a perceived loss of control. Many times this fear results in angry outbursts. We saw this in our country in our town hall meetings. The people were angry that our economy was out of control. What we do is try to control something. The problem is we can’t control something. If people would just drive the way I want them to…honk! My life may be out of control, but my house is going to be tidy…We step out of the realm of being managers and become manipulators. There comes a small satisfaction that we have one little part of our world under control. Manipulation becomes frustrating for you and very difficult for the people with whom you live. Becoming a control freak does not help your fears, it only exacerbates them. You will eventually fail.

Martin Niemoller was a Lutheran pastor in World War II who took a stand against the German dictator Adolph Hitler. He heard Hitler speak in 1933 and following the speech the pastor’s wife asked him, “What was your impression?” Niemoller replied, “I perceive that Hitler is a terribly frightened man.” Fear can make us angry people, and fear just makes us fear dreadful, doesn’t it? Do any of you wake up in the morning and say, “Boy, I’m just going to worry a lot today!”
Jesus takes fear seriously. He really does not want you to live in a state of fear. His most common command to you was “Don’t be afraid.” There were 120 of them. Over twenty actually said “Don’t be afraid.” “Be of good cheer.” Do no worry.” “Have courage.” More than any other command.

Fear does serve a healthy purpose in life, however. Because of fear we avoid physical injury. Fear is a gift from God to protect us, in limited dosage. It alerts us to potential danger. The problem is not the appearance of fear, the problem is the pervasion of fear. When fear becomes the oxygen that we breathe, then we are in trouble. We cannot let it become our default reaction to every crisis in life. We must not remain in a constant state of fear. The Bible says that God has not given us a “spirit of fear.” He permits the occasions of fear to waken us up, to make sure we study for the test. That’s a good kind of fear. He encourages us to have a fear of God. Not a hiding, running away fear, but a respect, reverential awe. The Bible says that the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. My father was a pipe liner in West Texas with huge biceps, and when my playmates would come around, I’d say, come on, feel my Daddy’s muscles! There was something about feeling my Father’s muscles that made me feel strong. This is what fear of the Lord is. It is putting your hand on your Heavenly Father’s biceps. That’s why we worship, declare His strength. That’s why we read the Bible, to remember His strength. That’s why we share testimonies, because we want to see how God can be strong. If you are passing through a time of fear, you may need to ask God to flex His muscles.

Here’s how Jesus did that. The night before His crucifixion, our Master was very afraid. He was afraid, because He knew that the next day He would be the sacrifice for humanity and the sin of the entire world would be placed upon His shoulders and His alone. He was afraid of separation from God His Father. How did Jesus find courage? He went into the Garden of Gethsemane, but He didn’t go alone. He took with Him Peter, James and John. He said “Stay here while I pray.” And He fell on His face while He prayed. One prayer wasn’t enough. And He prayed another time. And He urged Peter and James and John to pray with Him. And He prayed another time. And finally after that third time of prayer, He was armed with courage-enough courage to face the challenge of Good Friday. You can do this! The next time you find yourself entering into a season of fear, rather than simply submit or subject yourself to it, learn a lesson from Jesus’ playbook. Go into your Garden of Gethsemane. If you can get away for some time of prayer, get away. If you can’t, that’s okay. Just remain in a state of prayer.

Every time the fears come to your mind, defy them in prayer. Pray without ceasing. Three prayers won’t be enough. You have to pray honestly and candidly. Put words to your fear. Jesus said, when He prayed, “Lord, take this cup away from me.” He prayed specifically about His fear. This is an important step.
Put words on your fear, because when you put words on your fear, it disrobes them. They look silly standing there naked. Take them before your Heavenly Father. Say, “Lord, I’m afraid of this medical report.” “I’m afraid of this downturn in the economy.” Be specific. Recruit your own version of Peter, James and John to pray with you. Hopefully your will do better at staying awake. Recruit a prayer team. That’s why you need a wonderful church. Avoid any church that won’t let you express your fears. The church has to be the place where we can be honest about our fears. Jesus was honest about His. How much more should we be candid about ours?

Let fear knock at the door of your heart, issue the necessary warning for your life, and leave! Don’t invite fear in to stay.