

GOD STAYS WITH US, ALWAYS!
DEUTERONOMY 31:8b
SERMON

I love participating in various kinds of sports and watching sports on television! I'm looking forward to watching the Vancouver Winter Olympics in February. One of the rising American stars in speed skating is a twenty year old man by the name of Trevor Mariscano. Six years ago he suffered a severe injury while competing that nearly cost him his life. Another skater accidentally ran over his leg and cut his leg terribly. Trevor lost nearly half of his blood supply. But, he recovered and has made the 2010 American Olympic speed skating team. A devout Christian, Trevor speaks of his faith in Christ. He prays before all his races and carries his Bible while traveling.

Trevor faced a huge challenge when he nearly died from his speed skating accident in 2004. I imagine that he not only feared for his life but also feared that he might never again be able to skate and compete at a world class level.

Today I launch a new sermon series on the subject of fear. For the next eleven weeks we're going to investigate fear and what the Bible has to say about it. We begin today with the theme verse I selected for 2010, **Deuteronomy 31:8, "The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid, do not be discouraged"**.

Last week we studied the first part of Deut 31:8 and today we examine the second part of the verse that states, "do not be afraid, do not be discouraged". Moses, who spoke these words, used them to reassure the Jews. They were preparing to enter the Promised Land and they desperately needed reassurance! Moses tells them that God will lead them and stay with them, always! Listen again to the first part of Deut 31:8, **"The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you. He will never leave you nor forsake you"**. Moses lays the foundation for what he says next, about avoiding fear. The Jews don't have to be afraid because God will go before them, stay with them and never, ever leave them!!

That's true for us today also! If we possess a true, authentic faith in Jesus Christ we don't have to live as fearful people! We can avoid fear because of our faith and the promises we read in the Bible. The Bible teaches us that God goes before us, stays with us and will never, ever leave us! **God stays with us, always!**

Perhaps you're dealing with a situation in your life today that has stirred up feelings of fear. Maybe you haven't been working much lately and you're afraid of not having enough to pay your bills. Or, a loved one has developed a serious health concern and you fear what might happen to him or her. Maybe you're a young person with some specific goals for your life and you're afraid that God might not want you to pursue those particular goals. Or, you're an older person preparing for retirement but you fear the prospects of retiring if the economy doesn't recover.

All of us struggle with fear. Consider these questions: "what do I do with my fear?" Do I let it linger and grow inside of me? Do I repress it and pretend it doesn't exist? If I choose to admit that I am fearful about something, whom can I trust with this admission? Let's keep these questions in mind as we study the Biblical text in more depth. We learn,

1. God's permanent presence calms our fears.

Look again in our theme verse, **Deuteronomy 31:8**. The last phrase states, **“Do not be afraid...”** Moses seeks to calm the fears of the people. What were the Israelites afraid of, exactly? They already knew about giant people that lived in the land that the spies had told them about forty years earlier. They were afraid of what these people might do to them. They probably feared being killed by them. They feared dashed expectations, as they were thrilled with the prospects of finally entering the land God had promised them. But, what if the land wasn't all they had imagined? They feared the unknown, uncertainty, and being able to be obedient to God. Would they really be able to conquer the land and live in the land, peacefully?

The Hebrew word for “afraid” used by Moses in Deut 31:8 appears often in the Old Testament. For instance, back in the book of Exodus when God appeared to Moses in the burning bush the text reports that, **“Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God”**. (Ex 3:6b) So, Moses himself experienced fear!

Centuries later, when Nehemiah led an expedition back to Israel from Babylon he encountered stiff opposition when he tried to re-build the wall around Jerusalem. We read in **Nehemiah 4:14**, where Nehemiah comments on the armed opposition: **“After I looked things over, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people “Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord who is great and awesome and fight for your brothers, your sons and daughters, your wives and children”**.

I love the psalmists' expression in **Psalm 56:3** when he writes very honestly and candidly, **“When I am afraid, I will trust in you”**. Can you say that to God?

If you struggle with some kind of fear today, realize that God's presence in your life, the Holy Spirit of God can calm your fear! Listen to this promise Jesus gave us in the gospel of John: **“But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. Peace I leave with you, my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid”**. (John 14:26-27)

On Christmas Eve at our 7pm service, I showed a clip of a little girl of about five or six years old singing, “Happy Birthday, Jesus”. It touched many people because she sang with great sincerity. The Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir, of Brooklyn, New York. a choir of some 275 members backed her up. This choir has won 4 Grammy awards. Carole Cymbala, whose husband serves as the pastor of the Brooklyn Tabernacle, directs the choir. A few years ago, Carole wrote a wonderful book about her life called, “He's Been Faithful”. Listen to what she writes about her experience with fear:

“School was never a safe place for me, a place to be myself, to learn from my mistakes and develop my talents. I felt fearful, unable to measure up. I was a daydreamer, a child who loved creative things and working with her hands but who hated to study. That frightened first grader, in fact, typified my experience of life for a long time to come. Given my deep level of insecurity, you may wonder what has kept me from painting my life into the smallest of corners, making my world a safe but narrow place?.. It's been my sense of God's incredible love. I simply wanted to love him back the best way I could, and I've always known that loving him meant

saying yes, no matter how awkward or afraid I felt. I remember as a 17 year old girl, praying, “God, whatever you want with my life, whatever you want me to do, I want to say yes to you” That’s all it took. As a teenager I played the piano and organ in my father’s church. Later, when I was 22, Jim and I were pastoring a small church in Newark, New Jersey where I formed my very first choir. I had invited six middle aged women to come to my home so I could teach them one simple song we could sing together in church. How hard could that be? But I felt so young and out of place, even though my husband was the pastor. Who was I to tell these women anything? I didn’t eat the whole day, and was so nervous I got sick that afternoon before they came and was sick again after the women left. But I survived. (Cymbala, Carole, *He’s Been Faithful*, pgs. 20-21)

This once shy and fearful woman today leads a choir of 275 people who sing all over the world! She has written many songs and Carole Cymbala has learned that God can calm her fears. Have you learned this lesson about your fears?

2. God’s permanent presence works against discouragement.

Look again in our text in the final phrase of **Deut 31:8...** “do not be discouraged”. The Hebrew word translated “discouraged” means “to be broken, cast down, shattered, to be dismayed”. Unlike the word for “afraid” used in the text, this particular word doesn’t appear very often in the Old Testament. In fact, I found it only in two other places!

What causes discouragement in our lives? Many things: poor health, losing a job, getting bad grades at school, not being accepted into the college we hoped to attend, breaking up with a girl friend or boy friend, losing a loved one, getting a poor evaluation at work, failing to win a scholarship, having someone we respect and admire let us down.

During my first year of seminary as I struggled to learn Greek the pastor of my home church suffered a severe, nervous breakdown. He was admitted to the Menninger Clinic, a nationally respected psychiatric hospital in Topeka, Kansas where he remained for several months. I remember being absolutely devastated by my pastor’s breakdown! My hero had fallen! The man I respected greatly, a man who had inspired me to enter the ministry, the man God had used to build my home church was human after all. I walked around in a daze for several weeks, fighting feelings of intense discouragement. My world had been shattered.

I shared my feelings with Sally and my Care Group. They were very understanding and supportive. They prayed for me. The Lord spoke to me and reminded me of his love and presence in my life. The Lord reminded me that I served him, not my pastor. Gradually, I recovered from my discouragement.

The next summer Sally and I visited my pastor and his wife back in our hometown. His time at the Menninger Clinic had helped him considerably. God was healing him. He eventually returned to full time ministry and served in a number of different churches.

I learned a lot from that experience. I learned that I should never put any human being up on a pedestal, regardless of their gifts and abilities and regardless of their position in the church. Every human being has the capability of falling and falling hard. I also learned that I needed to establish boundaries in my ministry. One of the reasons my

pastor suffered his nervous breakdown was that he never took a day off; he often worked seven days a week. I determined at that point in my life never to become a workaholic.

We can learn from difficult situations and discouraging times. Look for the lessons God seeks to teach you in your difficulties. Be open to his guidance and instruction! Finally, we learn:

3. God's permanent presence means that God will never, ever leave us.

Note the second part of **Deut 31:8**, “...he will never leave you nor forsake you”.

Moses spoke these words to Joshua before he led the children into the Promised Land. Turn over to **Joshua 1:5** where God speaks these exact, same words to Joshua after the death of Moses. “**No one will be able to stand up against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you**”. God reminded Joshua that he would be with him always on two separate occasions: before the death of Moses and after his death. God reminded Joshua of his permanent presence because God knew Joshua faced a formidable task: leading the children of Israel into the Promised Land. What a responsibility! What pressure! The Jews would encounter stiff opposition and great trials. Joshua would need the assurance of God's permanent presence!

In the New Testament we read similar words in the book of Hebrews. Turn to **Hebrews 13:5**, where the author provides some concluding words of encouragement to the readers. “**Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, “Never will I leave you, and never will I forsake you”**”.

In the New Testament, God reminds us of his permanent presence in the context of having enough money and learning to be content with what we have. What a great word for us today, as we struggle through difficult economic times! Have you been unable to find a job? Have you had salary or hours at work cut? Are you worried your job might be next on the chopping block?

Fear can easily overwhelm us when it comes to jobs, money and provision. We can spend sleepless nights trying to figure out what we can do to survive. As Christians, what do we do when we lose our job or experience salary reduction? God wants us to access the Holy Spirit living within us, the Bible, common sense and intelligence as well as open and shut doors to help figure out His will for our lives. But we must be careful to avoid feeding our fears. Max Lucado writes in his book, **Fearless**, that if we feed our fears, our faith starves. (pg.74) We can't have it both ways; it's either faith or fear.

God knows our situation. God knows that we need to work to feed our families and pay our bills! The Bible teaches that God cares about us deeply! We simply have to hang it there with our faith and trust God to get us through the tough times!

Remember, **God stays with us always!** Every human being can and will leave us, eventually. But God never leaves us or forsakes us, even when we feel fearful or hopeless or lost. **God stays with us always!** Today, I want to leave you with this good news. God's permanent presence can calm our fears, God's permanent presence works against discouragement and God remains with us always, in spite of our feelings or situation. Let us pray.