December 15th – 10:30am

Springfield Presbyterian Church

Do Not Be Afraid

I. The Perks of Being a Wallflower

In 1999, Stephen Chbosky penned a notable novel called, ‘The Perks of Being a Wallflower’ and in 2012, the book was crafted into a movie. The book’s main protagonist, Charlie, is a wallflower; he is a freshman in high school who writes letters to an imaginary or unknown friend. He is beguiled by feeling a deep sense of loneliness, but as he enters his freshman year, he hopes things change for him.

And they do. Sam and Patrick, take him in and try to show him what a life can look outside the confines of his leaning against the wall. They guide him, they show him, a new way of life, filled with parties and antics and football games and all that one could imagine of a robust high school life. Charlie, curious and sensitive, steps into all these new situations with a sense of trepidation or suspicion.

Charlie says in one of the scenes, “I am both happy and sad at the same time and I’m still trying to figure out how that can be.” For me, it is such a poignant reflection, opening the doors of exploration for all of us, particularly in this season. I am feeling both joy at the sounds of carols and lights hung upon a tree, but I also feel sad about losses and a world that isn’t as I hoped it could or would be. I relate to Charlie, I sit in both the candle lit for joy this morning, but I also sit in sadness too. They are not opposing emotions, but somehow, someway, beyond our comprehension, as Charlie says, “I’m still trying to figure out how that can be.”

And I hardly believe I’m alone in that philosophical question – I fully believe that we all live in both joy and sadness, or maybe more, especially in this season.

II. Fearfulness

Another emotion that radiates from Charlie’s every interaction is fear. He is a wallflower – he asks continually how he will be liked, will his fellow students shame him, will he forever be the outcast. We can empathize to one level or another with Charlie’s fear, for it is an inherent human emotion.

We live in a world where fear is a norm – where we fear that God is not here, where we fear that our enemies are winning, where we fear our hands are weak and powerless, where we fear we are insignificant, where we fear the uncertainty of natural disasters and politics, where we fear that we aren’t enough, where we fear the shame upon our hands. And more, and more – all around the world, all of God’s children, fear something, whether they are daring enough to admit it or not. We, as Charlie said in the movie, are content with less when he says, “we accept the love we think we deserve.” And how often, as children of God, do we underestimate God’s love, but step in complacency into fear.

III. Zephaniah’s Perspective – Do Not Be Afraid

The book and movie, ‘Perks of a Wallflower’ is not a religious film, but it is an insight to human life – a life in which on some level we can relate. By all means, the actual context of Zephaniah’s world is very different from Charlie’s or from our world in Sykesville. One might ask – how do you take that leap? What does Zephaniah have to do with us today?

Yes, the people Zephaniah is addressing certainly live in a different world and time, but by all means, as we hear the passage from Zephaniah, the human emotions that run throughout it surpass the test of time. The folks he is approaching share fear, a fear of shame, a fear of disaster, a fear that God can’t restore the mess they find themselves in. Why should they listen to this prophet? The prophet is always the one who makes us uncomfortable, who points us in different directions, who offers outrageous concepts of what the future looks like, and says the unexpected. Yet, these are the signs of a true prophet – so from Zephaniah to today, listen closely to those who challenge us to a better way – a way of freedom, a way where those shamed will shout with joy, a way where fear dissolves and praise rises to the surface.

IV. The World We Find Ourselves In

Can God restore the mess we’ve found ourselves in? Can God restore a nation disconnected by differing political views? Can God restore us, as God’s people, to do the work we need to do? Can God restore the disparity of rich and poor, educated and uneducated, and so on? Can God do this? Will God do this?

Zephaniah has an emphatic ‘YES’ response to the people he is addressing, and I believe that ‘YES’ carries onto today. We hear, on repeat, in this passage and many of the passages of the season, ‘Do not be afraid.’ Here’s what you need to know about that phrase. The phrase ‘Do not be afraid’ is not a plea – it isn’t as if Zephaniah is saying to the people, ‘Please, just don’t be afraid, it’s all going to be okay.” No, Zephaniah is using a declarative statement, it is a statement of joy, it is not a plea, it is a sure and known response by this prophet: “Do not be afraid.”

V. Reversing Outlooks

When we change that statement from a plea to a declarative statement, I feel power within the statement. I notice that my back straightens up, my confidence is stronger, and my faith propels me forth. What an incredible gift, a gift of joy, to turn your outlook to saying, “Fear has held me back because I thought I wasn’t good enough, but now, in knowing that God’s promises continue, I am not afraid. I am free. I am free indeed.”

Fear has a paralyzing feeling, and the shame that we feel in that fear is one that can make us sink back in our chairs and avert our eyes, hoping that Christmas will mean something different this year, but feeling a deep suspicion it won’t. Zephaniah is saying to his people, and I say to you today, in 2018, let your shame turn to praise. You are allowed to be human and fearful and lost in moments, but when you feel that, particularly this season, I want you to challenge your mind as Zephaniah challenged the people. I want you to say, out loud, “I am not afraid.” And you are not afraid because God’s Kingdom is coming and the Christ child is about to turn the nations upside down.

There’s this common mantra, “Fake it until you make it.” Perhaps that’s where you are when you say the words ‘I am not afraid.’ But the more often you say it, the more often you claim it’s truth, the more inherent it will be. All the sudden, whether that’s tomorrow, or next month, or next year, or somewhere down the line, you will believe it, you with confidence can say, “I am not afraid” and know with integrity that Jesus is coming, and coming soon, where all will be restored and God’s promises withstand the test of trial and time. And as you say those words, on this Sunday, may you anticipate with great joy the day in which ‘I am not afraid’ becomes a firmer felt reality, for you, for me, for this world, in the birth of Christ. Amen.