

The Wired Word

Student Handout

Sunday, December 27, 2020

Dear Class Member,

The Sunday, December 27 lesson begins with information about the kind of topics people searched for on Bible websites and applications in 2020. Unsurprisingly, one prominent theme has been "fear." Since the Bible in general and the Christmas narrative in particular feature many imperatives to "not be afraid," we will consider how our faith can help us handle our fears in constructive ways.

How To Participate:

All Sunday School Classes, including *The Wired Word*, are **CANCELLED** for December 27 & January 3.

However, you can still use this lesson for reflection and discussion with family and friends.

With the exception of Dec 27 & Jan 3, we are offering *The Wired Word* class live via Zoom. *The Wired Word* Zoom discussion will be from 9:00am-9:45am on Sunday mornings. You can also use these resources to reflect or study on your own, with your family/friends, and/or with your Abide Group.

Until further notice, there is NO in-person Sunday school due to the COVID-19 Pandemic.

For other learning opportunities through St. Paul's UCC go to: <http://www.sprucc.org/classes.html>

To subscribe or unsubscribe for the **free** weekly mailing of *The Wired Word* student handout, please contact the church office at Office@sprucc.org.



Online Bible Searches on Fear, Justice and Healing Soar in 2020

The Wired Word for the Week of December 27, 2020

In the News

2020 began normally enough for the world's most downloaded Bible app, [YouVersion \(YV\)](#), with "new year," "Bible in a year," "faith" and "fasting" popping up as the phrases users searched for most frequently. But when the pandemic hit, "fear" took the top spot. In subsequent weeks, people searched more often for terms like "peace," "hope" and "faith." Other words that trended upward this year included "justice," "healing" and "love."

"These top search terms really show what's been weighing on the hearts and minds of people around the world at key points throughout the year," said YV founder Bobby Gruenewald. "They reveal how people are seeking God as they wrestle with the difficult circumstances they've faced in 2020, and that's something we can celebrate."

"Through every hardship, people continue to seek God and turn to the Bible for strength, peace, and hope," Gruenewald added.

This year, globally and in the United States, Isaiah 41:10 (*Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand*) repeated its number 1 rank as the most searched, read, and bookmarked verse on YV in 2018.

In 2019, Philippians 4:6 (*Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God*) was the verse YV users shared, highlighted, and bookmarked most.

John 3:16 (*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life*), followed by Jeremiah 29:11 (*For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope*), topped [Bible Gateway's](#)

(BG) list of most popular Bible verses for 2020, as they have in most previous years since the website began keeping records. 2 Chronicles 7:14 (*if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land*) claimed the number 3 spot this year.

In 2020, Bible Gateway, the world's most visited Christian website, according to HarperCollins Christian Publishing, grouped their users' searches for Bible verses and topics into four main themes: social, pandemic, political and end times.

Keywords people chose in BG online searches about social issues, which spiked after the death of George Floyd, included racism, justice and oppression. In March, after the Covid-19 outbreak, BG queries for keywords such as disease, pestilence, plague and healing increased almost 100-fold.

Key verses related to politics and the election that people highlighted involved prayer for government officials and submission to governmental authorities. Regarding end times, people searched for the terms "the end of the world" and "signs of end times."

Depending on what was happening in the world, different keywords rose or fell in BG search trends. "Fear" kicked off 2020, with "justice" trending upward in May, August and September. "Hope," "healing," "peace" and "love" were popular word searches on BG throughout the year. Searches for the phrase "fear not" increased as the year progressed.

Supplemental Material

Other popular verses on YV in 2020 were:

- John 3:16 -- For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.
- 1 Peter 5:7 -- Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.
- Matthew 6:33 -- But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.
- Jeremiah 29:11 -- For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.

In previous years, YV's verse of the year award went to:

- Philippians 4:6 (2019) -- Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.
- Isaiah 41:10 (2018) -- Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.
- Joshua 1:9 (2017) -- I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.
- Romans 8:28 (2016) -- We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.
- Proverbs 3:5-6 (2015) -- Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.

Top verses people focused on in Bible Gateway online searches during 2020 were:

- Proverbs 21:15 (social issues) -- When justice is done, it is a joy to the righteous, but dismay to evildoers.
- Isaiah 1:17 (social issues) -- Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.
- Exodus 23:25 (pandemic) -- You shall worship the LORD your God, and I will bless your bread and your water; and I will take sickness away from among you.
- Jeremiah 33:6 (pandemic) -- I am going to bring it recovery and healing; I will heal them and reveal to them abundance of prosperity and security.
- 1 Timothy 2:1-2 (politics) -- First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity.

- Romans 13:1 (politics) -- Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.
- 2 Timothy 3:1-5 (end times) -- You must understand this, that in the last days distressing times will come. For people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, inhuman, implacable, slanderers, profligates, brutes, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to the outward form of godliness but denying its power. Avoid them!
- Matthew 24:36 (end times) -- But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[2020's Most-Read Bible Verse Found in Book of Isaiah: YouVersion. *The Christian Post*](#)

[This Is the Most-Read Bible Verse of 2020. *Bibliatodo News*](#)

[2020's Most-Read Bible Verse: 'Do Not Fear.' *Christianity Today*](#)

[The Most Popular Bible Verse of 2020: Apparently We Needed a Reminder Not to Fear. *Church Leaders*](#)

[The Most Read Bible Verses in 2020. *Aleteia*](#)

Applying the News Story

The command to "not be afraid" occurs frequently in scripture and is prominent in the birth narrative of the Christ child in particular. While we could explore many passages dealing with fear, for this lesson we will focus on the sections in Matthew and Luke where this topic comes up, to aid us in thinking about how our faith can help us deal with fear in productive ways.

The Big Questions

1. When in your life have you been most afraid?
2. What is your greatest fear?
3. Is handling a strong emotion such as terror or panic as easy as "mind over matter"? Why or why not?
4. What Bible verse would you choose to help you deal with fear in 2021?
5. How might the gospel of Jesus Christ help you cope with fear?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Matthew 2:22

But when [Joseph] heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. (For context, read 2:16-23.)

After the wise men visited the Holy Family in Bethlehem, they were warned in a dream not to return to King Herod, so they returned home by a different route. When he realized that the wise men had tricked him, Herod, enraged, massacred all the two-year-old children of Bethlehem.

Upon Herod's death, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, where he had taken his wife Mary and her child. The angel instructed Joseph to take his family to Israel, because the danger to the child had abated for the present. Joseph did as he was told, but chose to settle in Nazareth in Galilee, rather than in Judea, where Archelaus had become king in place of his brutal father.

We might be inclined to view certain emotions (such as love, joy, or peace) as positive, and other feelings (such as fear, anger, jealousy, or hatred) as negative. But Joseph's fear appears to have been useful in this situation.

Questions: When might fear be harmful or unproductive? When might fear serve a useful purpose? How do you determine how your own fears are functioning in any given circumstance? Depending on the way fear is impacting you and others, how do you decide the best way to handle your fear?

Luke 1:12-13, 65-66

When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John." ... Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, "What then will this child become?" For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him. (For context, read 1:5-25, 57-66.)

Luke sets the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth "in the days of King Herod of Judea," the same king who slaughtered the innocents (Matthew 2:16). So we know that the couple lived in perilous times. In addition, they were getting on in years and had no children, in spite of having lived blamelessly before God (vv. 5-7).

In his duty as a priest, while he was offering incense in the sanctuary of the Lord, an angel appeared to Zechariah (vv. 8-11). Initially, the old man was petrified. The angel attempted to reassure him with the good news that his aged wife Elizabeth would become pregnant and have a son, who would be the source of great joy for him and many others. Even God would view him as great, for he would play an important role in God's plan to save the world (vv. 14-17).

Zechariah couldn't imagine how even God could pull off such an audacious plan, given that he and Elizabeth were both elderly, well past childbearing age (v. 18). Because of Zechariah's lack of faith, he was struck mute until the day his son was born. But when Zechariah confirmed that his child should be named John, as the angel had commanded, his mouth was opened and he began praising God (vv. 19-25, 57-64).

During Elizabeth's pregnancy, Zechariah had a long time to contemplate in silence on what God was doing. When he was finally able to speak again, he "was filled with the Holy Spirit" and prophesied about the redemption God was raising up through a mighty savior, who would empower his people to serve him without fear of their enemies or recrimination for their own sins (vv. 67-79).

Questions: Are you or have you ever been fearful when it appears that God may be about to answer your prayers? What might prompt fear in that situation? Is such fear warranted? Why or why not?

What prompted Zechariah's neighbors' fear? What is it about God's hand with a person that might generate fear? Have you ever had occasion to experience that kind of fear? How is that kind of fear like or unlike the fear Zechariah felt when he first heard the angel's prophecy about his wife's pregnancy?

Have you contemplated what God might be doing during this crazy year? What insights or conclusions, if any, have you drawn? When these momentous events are done, what do you think you will have to say about how God is at work in the world?

Luke 1:30, 37

The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ... For nothing will be impossible with God." (For context, read 1:26-38.)

Matthew 1:20-21, 24

But just when [Joseph] had resolved to [end their engagement], an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ... When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife ... (For context, read 1:18-25.)

When the angel Gabriel visited Mary to announce that she would conceive and give birth to the Son of the Most High, he assured her of God's favor and presence with her. As evidence of God's power to bring forth life from her womb, even though she had not had sexual relations with a man, the angel told her that her aged cousin Elizabeth was pregnant and would also bear a son.

When Joseph learned of his fiancée's pregnancy, he planned to end their engagement, since he knew the child was not his. Just then an angel appeared to assure him that Mary's pregnancy was in God's plan of salvation.

The angel didn't just transmit information to Mary and Joseph, but also addressed their emotional state and other concerns. What tender care God provided for this couple, to give them the support they needed to accept God's will and move forward in faith!

Questions: What do you imagine were Mary's greatest fears when she heard the angel's greeting? What do you imagine were Joseph's greatest fears when he learned that Mary was pregnant? What was most reassuring to each of them in the way the angel addressed their fears?

Think about a time when it seemed that God "went the extra mile" to provide you with assurance to face a major challenge. How did that help you overcome any fears you had?

Luke 2:8-11, 17

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see -- I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." ... When they saw [the infant], they made known what had been told them about this child ... (For context, read 2:8-20.)

When Jesus was born, an angel brought the news to shepherds who were working the night shift, watching over their flock. This job may not have been too hard during the daytime, when it was easier to spot potential predators, would-be robbers and other dangers. But at night, when they were already tired from their labor, every little sound might spook them, sending their senses into high alert, lest they and the flock might come under sneak attack.

These shepherds, who might range in age from young children to the aged, had to be pretty rugged to live out in the fields, and possess great courage to watch over the flock at night. Yet even they could be terrified.

But the angel exhorted them not to be afraid, but to open their eyes to see what God was doing.

When they went to Bethlehem, they found the child, and responded by praising and glorifying God, and by sharing their joy with others.

Questions: When, if ever, have you been terrified by something that you later discovered was good news? What kind of message do you think God might sometimes be sending us in our own experiences of terror?

What was good about the news the angel brought to the shepherds (vv. 10-16, 20)? What is good about that news for us today?

How do you think it affected Mary and Joseph to hear the shepherds' story? How might telling your story about how you have seen God at work impact others?

For Further Discussion

1. Discuss this, from TWW team member, Frank Ramirez: "For me one of the strongest Do Not Fear scriptures is Genesis 1:1-5: The Spirit of God broods over the face of the waters. Darkness covers the earth, Tohu and Bohu, the ancient gods of chaos (translated 'formless' and 'void') are there, but when God says 'Let there be Light!' there is Light.

"*Bara*, the word translated 'create' means 'build.' God built a secure universe in the opening of Genesis. Chaos lurks on the edge, always ready to return and destroy.

"But the book of Revelation makes it clear that God has already won. When Satan assaults heaven in Revelation 12, God doesn't even deign to treat Satan as someone worthy to meet in battle. Michael kicks Satan's sorry behind out of heaven. When the battle of Armageddon looms, an angel speaks a single word: *gegenon*, 'It is done,' and that's it. The battle is done and won (Revelation 16:17).

"Do not fear. It's rough out there, but God is in control."

2. Respond to this: TWW team member Stan Purdum says that the most lasting fear in his life has been in his role as a father, "always having concern that I couldn't protect my children from everything and that something bad would happen to them. They are adults now, and handling life well, but I still want the best for them. And now that they have children of their own, I have a similar concern for my grandchildren. The worst horror stories for me are of parents who have lost a child through accident, illness or the criminal action of someone else."

3. Ralph Waldo Emerson, in *The American Scholar*, wrote, "Fear always springs from ignorance." Do you think that's true or only partly true? Might not fear sometimes also spring from what we really do know?

Responding to the News

When you are afraid, name your fears before the Lord. Seek the Lord, as the psalmist did (Psalm 34:4), and ask him to deliver you from all your fears.

Prayer Suggested by Deuteronomy 3:22; 7:21; 20:1; 31:6-8

Thank you, great and awesome God, for your assurance that you are present with your people, and you yourself fight for them. You brought your people out of the land of bondage before, and you will do it again. Therefore, there is no need for fear! You never fail nor forsake those who put their trust in you. Strengthen our faith in you and make us bold to conquer fear! Amen.

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