

## Pantophobia

Michigan Area Annual Conference  
Opening Worship

May 30, 2024  
Bishop David Alan Bard

**Texts:** Isaiah 41:10; I John 3:2

Good afternoon, beautiful people of God. I greet you in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the peace and power of the Holy Spirit. I greet you with great joy. How good it is to be together, and we trust that as we gather in the name of the risen Christ, the risen Christ is with us.

I want to pause here and acknowledge the life and ministry of those we have remembered. Some of them have family here and we welcome you. Thank you for being with us. My sermon is going to focus on the future, but our future as a church is built on the faithful ministry of those who have come before us and we are grateful.

It is good to be together. Have I told you lately how delighted I am to be your bishop, what a gift you are to me? I am proud to be the bishop of the Michigan Conference and proud to be a Michigander. By the way, in my first year as bishop I read a well-regarded history of the state in which the authors argued that we should call ourselves “Michigianians.” I’ve never heard anyone ever use that term!

Of course, you know that my roots are in Minnesota and that for two years I also served as the bishop of my home conference. They are concluding their annual conference today. If you think about that geography, it was quite some territory, and you may think the two states don’t share a border, but you would be wrong. Somewhere just on the north side of Isle Royale, Michigan and Minnesota meet.

I carry some Minnesota with me, and one part of Minnesota I carry with me is Charles Schultz, the creator of *Peanuts*. Schultz was born in Minneapolis, and raised in St. Paul from where he graduated high school. I don't carry Charles Schultz perhaps so much as his creation, Charlie Brown. One of my personal traditions every Christmas is to watch *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. I love the jazz accompaniment and the story.

I won't re-tell the entire story here, but Charlie Brown, in the way only Charlie Brown can, makes Christmas a problem. He seeks some help from his friend Lucy, who offers psychiatric counsel for a nickel. Lucy seeks to get at the root of his problem, wanting to pinpoint his fears. Responsibility – hypenyophobia; cats – ailurophasia; staircases – climocophobia; ocean – thalassophobia; crossing bridges – gephyrophobia. Lucy: “Or maybe you have pantophobia? Do you think you have pantophobia?” Charlie Brown: “What's pantophobia?” “Fear of everything.” “That's it!”

Fear. It is powerful, and it is prevalent. Watch the nightly news and you are bound to feel a bit pantophobic. Storms are ravaging the country. Portage and Union City experienced recent tornados, and our hearts go out to the people in places like Greenfield, Iowa and Valley View, Texas as we witness the death and destruction there. We have a justifiable fear of such devastating storms, and our fear is increased knowing that our changing climate is contributing to the enhancement of such weather events. Forecasters are predicting a record-setting hurricane season. With our upcoming elections, there is a fear of political violence. Following COVID, the mere mention of Avian flu rattles us a bit, though we keep hearing that the risk remains minimal. And for our churches we read the study on religious change released earlier this year by the Public Religion Research

Institute which informs us that “unaffiliated” is the only major religious category experiencing growth. 26% of Americans identify as religiously unaffiliated, and nearly one in five left a religious tradition to become religiously unaffiliated. We fear for the future of our churches.

I have used this acronym before, and it remains relevant. We live in a VUCA world. - volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous, and such a world is an incubator for our fears. Gil Rendle, in his book Countercultural: “We live in a time of anxiety, and we live in a culture of crisis” (xiii). Evidence of this cultural shift is being gathered and written about incessantly: a pandemic and postpandemic deep shift; a rising global populism spawning an historic political divide in the United States and elsewhere; a resurgence of white supremacy and racism; an economic divide between the wealthy and the poor that is eviscerating the middle class; a shift in who holds power and how it is wielded that is underwritten by changes in technology and communication... a climate change crisis that resides quietly beneath all other challenges with deadly global consequences” (26-27).

Furthermore, there are many in our social system who want to play on our fears, manipulate us by exaggerating small fears, perhaps even inventing new things to fear. As much as we can, it will be helpful in this world to separate legitimate concerns like climate change from those things that may be manufactured fear. Failure to do so contributes to what the leadership teacher Rabbi Edwin Friedman once described as “the chronic anxiety that currently ricochets from sea to shining sea” (A Failure of Nerve, original edition, p. 3).

And into this world of pantophobia come words familiar to those of us who read the Bible. “Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God” (Isaiah 41:10).

Do not fear. Do not be afraid. We hear such words again and again in our Scriptures, and we know a world where fear is real. Even the traditional gathering hymn for United Methodist Annual Conferences acknowledges this - "And Are We Yet Alive." After expressing gratitude for seeing each others' faces, and for being preserved by power divine, we find in verse 3: "What troubles have we seen, what mighty conflicts past, fightings without and fears within, since we assembled last." We have made progress in Methodism, we now also have fightings within! And there is fear.

Yet the words of Scripture, "do not fear, do not be afraid" which come to us again and again arrive in just fearful contexts – people in exile, moments of doubt, uncertainty about the future. Do not fear. Do not be afraid. Fearless – our theme for annual conference. Fearless: embracing a new future.

What does it mean to be fearless? It cannot mean never being afraid, particularly if that includes legitimate concerns about which we might do something. We should be concerned about climate change and act to reduce it and mitigate its impact. We should be concerned about possible political violence and work to foster more thoughtful political conversation and a more humane civic culture. A couple of weeks ago, I received my second shingle vaccine.

Yet there is something important about fearless. Fearless is not the complete absence of fear or concern, but "less fear." I know that I have mentioned Parker Palmer before in this regard, but he says it so beautifully. *"Be not afraid" does not mean we cannot have fear. Everyone has fear, and people who embrace the call to leadership often find fear abounding. Instead, the words say we do not have to be the fear we have. We do not*

*have to lead from a place of fear, thereby engendering a world in which fear is multiplied.*

(Parker Palmer, "Leading From Within")

We want to be fearless. We want to have less fear because fear has adverse affects. Professor Amy Edmondson, in her book The Fearless Organization notes “brain science has amply demonstrated that fear inhibits learning and cooperation.... Fear consumes physiologic resources, diverting them from parts of the brain that manage working memory and process new information. This impairs analytic thinking, creative insight and problem solving. This is why it’s hard for people to do their best work when they are afraid.” (14). Rabbi Edwin Friedman writes: “Imagination and indeed even curiosity are at root emotional, not cognitive phenomena” (37). Fear gets in the way of imagination and curiosity.

Do not fear. Do not be afraid. Fearless. Less fear. Embracing the future. I like to think of this not in terms of some kind of reckless abandon, careening thoughtlessly into the future. To be fearless as we embrace the future is to lean into the future while leaning in certain directions.

In this volatile world, to be fearless is to lean into compassion and caring. In Luke, Jesus tells us, “be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (6:36). Eugene Peterson renders this, “Our Father is kind; you be kind.” The writer Elizabeth Lesser contends, “real fearlessness is the product of tenderness” (Broken Open, 38). In a volatile world, with rapid change, with social dislocation, where we have yet to reckon with many past injustices, lean into compassion, caring, tenderness. We have a difficult situation at our southern border, but can we see that most of the people there are not there to do harm but

seeking a better life, fleeing violence? That doesn't mean we just let people through the border, but it does mean looking at what can be done to provide more stability in their home countries in this volatile world. And treating them humanely at the border.

Dehumanizing does not fit us as followers of Jesus. And our anti-bias, anti-racism work is rooted in seeking compassionate understanding of what it is like to live in this country when you have not been in the majority population. Lean into compassion, care, tenderness. LGBTQ persons have new space in our denomination and we need to hear their stories of the struggle and pain of the past 50 years. Lean into compassion, care and tenderness. Lean into compassion, care and tenderness. Let compassion ground our work for justice.

In this uncertain world, to be fearless is to lean into convicted humility. The author of I Peter encourages us, "have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind" (I Peter 3:8). "Convicted humility" is a phrase that came out of the work of The United Methodist Commission on the Way Forward prior to the 2019 General Conference. My friend, Bishop Ken Carter, a member of the commission, rightly notes that it had little impact on that gathering. However, he argues, "it can continue to serve as a resource wherever two or three of us are gathered in Jesus' name" (God Will Make a Way, 150). Convicted humility is a stance we maintain with each other in which we acknowledge our own deep convictions and hold that together "with humility about the way in which each of our views may stand in need of correction" (149). The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead captures this idea when he writes about philosophy: "speculative boldness must be balanced by complete humility" (Process and Reality, original, 25). In

the midst of an uncertain world, we need the courage of our convictions, and in an ambiguous world, we need to know that we can get it wrong. Convicted humility should be our stance not only with one another, but with those who are seeking faith. We need to honor their questions and their searching.

In this complex world, to be fearless is to lean into curiosity. Curiosity and humility are companions. If we don't know it all, or admit, at least, that our language in capturing our experience, particularly our experience with the depths of God's love in Jesus Christ is often inadequate, humility leads to curiosity. How might we understand better? What might someone else's experience have to teach me? The psychologist Rollo May writes about this well in his book The Courage to Create. "The person with the courage to believe and at the same time to admit his doubts is flexible and open to new learning.... To believe fully and at the same moment to have doubts is not at all a contradiction: it presupposes a greater respect for truth, an awareness that truth always goes beyond anything that can be said or done at any given moment." (12). When God responds to Job, it is not a foreclosure of thought but an invitation to deeper thinking, a curiosity to ponder mystery. "Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or walked in the recesses of the deep?... Where is the way to the dwelling of light, and where is the place of darkness?" (Job 38:16, 19). Again, I would encourage us to think about our work to build beloved community as, in important ways, a work of being curious, curious about what life is like for people whose background is different from ours.

In this ambiguous world, to be fearless is to lean into adventure and adaptability. Adventure. What could be more adventuresome than to be a Spirit-filled follower of Jesus?

Hear again some of the words of Jesus. “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). “Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these because I am going to the Father” (John 14:12). And to be on this adventure with Jesus requires adaptability. Recall Paul’s words, “I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel” (I Corinthians 9:22b-23a). While that passage needs to be treated carefully, it is a strong encouragement to adaptability.

Lean into adventure and adaptability. Two of the preeminent leadership thinkers of the past thirty years also speak to this. Rabbi Edwin Friedman writes that “ambiguity is intolerable in an atmosphere of anxiety” (Failure of Nerve, 60), and he encourages cultivating a spirit of adventure to move us out of imaginative gridlock. Ronald Heifetz has done some of the best work on leadership and adaptability. Adapting means “developing the organizational and cultural capacity to meet problems successfully according to our values and purposes” (Leadership Without Easy Answers, 3). Adaptive challenges are problems with no easy answers, like evangelism in a society where no affiliation is the only growing religious category. We meet adaptive challenges “by facing painful circumstances and developing new attitudes and behaviors” (5). Adapting is about learning and growing. It is about “improving [our] ability to reflect, strengthening [our] tolerance for frustration, and understanding [our] own blind spots and patterns of resistance to facing problems” (5).



In the midst of a polarized world and a world with rapidly shifting religious affiliations, to be fearless is to lean into conversation and community. Community as Christians understand it should never be reduced to a commodity, something to be shopped for and returned easily. We begin with the idea that “we who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another” (Romans 12:5). Given the history of the Church we know we have never fully lived into this, but now is the time to lean into this. In her book I Never Thought of It That Way, subtitled: “how to have fearlessly curious conversations in dangerously divided times” - - - and, yes, I really perused a lot of material with “fearless” in the title over these past few months, Mónica Guzman encourages such fearlessly curious conversations. Towards the end of her book she writes, “my second favorite word in Spanish that has no translation in English is *convivir*. It’s a verb that means “to live together” (233). Essential to *convivir* in our day is the ability to be curious together, to talk together, to walk together with, in Guzman’s words, “honesty, curiosity, respect” (234). Lean into *convivir*.

So how are we supposed to be fearless, leaning into compassion, caring, tenderness, convicted humility, curiosity, adventure, adaptability, conversation, community, *convivir*? This is all so countercultural. “Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God.” We can be fearless, we can lean into less fear by the grace of God and the power of God’s Spirit. “Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God.” Fearless, less fear, persistence.

The civil rights activist Bayard Rustin once said, “what God requires of us is that we not stop trying.” Fearless.

And when we persist in fearlessness by the power of God's Spirit, somethings gonna happen. As we were planning for his annual conference, and arriving at the theme "fearless" embracing the future," I wanted to include in our central Scriptures I John 3:2: "beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed." The older Revised Standard Version uses "shall" and I am going to work with that here. What we shall be has not yet been revealed to us. This puzzled some. Certainly we have answered some of those basic questions at General Conference, we will be inclusive in new ways. Yes, but that's not what catches my attention in I John 3:2. Eugene Peterson's rendering helps. "That's who we are: children of God. And that's only the beginning. Who knows how we'll end up." When I hear, "what we shall be" I hear "it's only a beginning." When we lean into fearlessness as God's people, we are on the edge of something new and beautiful, the full flowering of which awaits us. When we lean into fearlessness as we embrace the future bits of God's new creation in us emerge, begin to blossom and bloom, and it is a beginning, a wonderful beginning whose final beauty awaits.

"What we shall be" evokes for me a song from my younger days – "you ain't seen nothing yet."

When we lean into fearlessness, lean into compassion and tenderness, the very love of Christ takes deeper hold on our lives and our own inner wounds are healed, and we can bring some measure of healing to the world. We will with courage and compassion listen to people whose experience of the world is very different from ours and with them work to build beloved community. We will let compassion be the ground of our work for

justice. And this is only a beginning. What we shall be is still emerging, and you ain't seen nothing yet.

When we lean into fearlessness, lean into curiosity and convicted humility, our minds are renewed and transformed. We soak up learning. We meet people where they are. We cultivate beautiful minds. We help others expand their minds. And this is only a beginning. What we shall be is still emerging, and you ain't seen nothing yet.

When we lean into fearlessness, lean into adventure and adaptability, we create churches that are willing to experiment, try new things, look honestly at the enormous challenges of the world and trust that in the wisdom of God we can make a way. We will be a place of psychological safety where we can admit when an idea fizzled, and a place of countless serendipities of grace. And this is only a beginning. What we shall be is still emerging, and you ain't seen nothing yet.

When we lean into fearlessness, lean into conversation, community, convivir, we will recognize that our bonds of affection in Jesus Christ run deep. We will understand part of our witness to the world will be our ability to hang together amid differences, our ability to engage in deep and profound conversations about important matters even when we disagree. And this is only a beginning. What we shall be is still emerging, and you ain't seen nothing yet.

When we lean into fearlessness we will fearlessly embracing our mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, moving out of this season of deep discord and disaffiliation. And this is only a beginning. What we shall be is still emerging and you ain't seen nothing yet.

And when we lean into fearless we will fearlessly embrace our Wesleyan way of doing no harm, doing good, cultivating our love for God with all our hearts, souls, minds and strength, of a thoughtful faith and a sanctifying grace. And this is only a beginning. What we shall be is still emerging, and you ain't seen nothing yet.

I am coming to an end, friends. Lest you think all my music references are hopelessly dated, so last century, there's this. As we continue to respond to the God of Jesus Christ who only requires of us that we respond to the invitation to join the transformational journey and that we not stop trying, as we lean into fearlessness, well it evokes a more recent song. "I don't know why but with you I'd dance in a storm in my best dress, fearless!" Yes, that's Taylor, Swift and I guess she really is everywhere. And that lyric further reminds me of something I was given during the pandemic, a quote: "Life isn't about waiting for the storm to pass. It's about learning to dance in the rain."

Let's be fearless, friends. Let's lean into fearlessness. Let's lean leaning into compassion, caring, tenderness, convicted humility, curiosity, adventure, adaptability, conversation, community, convivir, lean into mission and our Wesleyan way as we embrace the future, trusting the grace of God and the power of God's Spirit. Yes, there are storms aplenty on the horizon, and we are leaning into fearlessness, learning together to dance in the rain. And I don't know why but with you I'd dance in a storm in my best dress, fearless. And you ain't seen nothing yet. Amen.