

**Oregon City United Methodist Church**  
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**Series: Simon and Garfunkel**  
**Sermon: Mrs. Robinson**

**Matthew 3:1-2, 7-8, 10**

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

**John 3:16-17**

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

**Sermon:**

A friend received a "Third Notice" from the IRS stating that his tax payment was overdue, and that unless it was immediately forthcoming, the IRS would be forced to take legal action. The very next day, he appeared at the IRS office with the overdue payment in hand, saying: "I would have paid sooner, but I never did receive the first or second notice!" The clerk replied, "We ran out of the other notices. Besides, we discovered that the third notices are much more effective."

What is it about fear that motivates us? Somewhere deep inside us, hidden from the light, is fear. We all fear many things. Fear comes in many different forms. We fear that which we do not know. We fear impending danger or peril. We fear public humiliation, we fear getting up in front of people, we fear embarrassment. I am scared to death of roller coasters. I'm not really scared of them, I can go up to one and touch it, but I am scared to ride on one. I just don't like anything that hurls you toward the ground at a very high velocity. That's what scared me the most about learning how to fly. One day, my flight instructor said, "Let's practice stalling." Excuse me? And there we were several thousand feet in the air, plummeting to the earth. If practice makes perfect, I don't want to know what the perfect stall looked like. We all have our own fears. Some of us are afraid of rejection. Some of us are afraid of being alone. Some of us fear financial worries, while others of us fear medical problems. But no matter what our fears are, they are wonderful motivators. All you have to do is look at the commercials on television and you can see how we are trained to fear. The number one seller in advertising is sex. Sex sells. But the number two seller is fear. They play on our fears to sell us their products. How many identity theft commercials are out there telling us that our very souls can be stolen? We have internet at our house, and now we have to buy virus protection (or our computer will self-destruct), we have to buy firewalls so outside users can't hack into our personal information, we have to get adware protection so other people can't put programs on our computer so they can send out our credit card numbers or bank information, the list goes on and on. The main reason most of us have a cell phone is in case we have trouble somewhere, for emergencies. We have OnStar in our cars to help us along the way. The hair loss commercials play on our fears of becoming bald. Weight-loss commercials play on our fear of getting fat. They don't talk about health as much as physical appearance. Indeed, fear is a major marketing tool. And it's what we know in the real world itself. Why do we do what we do at work? Because we're scared of losing our job, getting written up, losing that bonus, not moving up the ladder. There's a lot of us afraid at work, where fear is the driving force behind our performance. At school, the main fear is grades and tests and papers. If you don't study, you'll get a bad grade. Fear motivated many of my best papers at school. In short, the emotion of fear is

one of the most powerful forces in the human spirit. We use it to manipulate others, to find inner strength, and to accomplish that which we thought impossible.

In 1968, Simon and Garfunkel released Mrs. Robinson, which was used in the movie, the Graduate. Matter of fact, the movie producer wanted a Simon and Garfunkel song, and paid the duo \$25,000 to create the composition. It was originally called, Mrs. Roosevelt as an homage to the former first lady, Eleanor Roosevelt. Whoah, It's hard to see her as a Mrs. Robinson. This song was their second hit, after Sounds of Silence. It was the first Rock song to get Grammy of the Year. Elvis never got one, Beatles never got one. First rock song to get the grammy. Wow. Throughout the whole song, and movie, by the way, Mrs. Robinson is motivated by fear and loneliness. Her character is scared. She doesn't know about love. She doesn't know about forgiveness. She doesn't know about second chances. Jesus loves you more than you will know. Heaven holds a special place for those who pray. Hey, hey, hey. Hey, hey, hey. But she chose to live in fear.

You can see a lot of fear in faith. "But when John saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. But one will come after me, his winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire." Not a happy fun message! Repent or else! is the message. Why should you repent? Because if you don't, you will have hell to pay. Repentance out of fear. According to John, why should someone repent? Because you are scared. You repent out of the selfish reason of saving your hide. Fear of retribution or punishment. It's a good motivator. Growing up, you stayed out of trouble, I would imagine, because you were afraid of facing consequences. You kept in line because of that proverbial wood shed and leather belt. It would seem that we still use fear in our religious language as well. If you're good, you get to go to heaven. If you're bad, you earn your way to hell. There are many Christians who are Christians because they fear the flames of Hell. And that is the only reason they repent! To save their hide. Jim Wallis, a prolific writer and social activist mentioned the other day that he had two conversions to Christianity. The first was when he was 8 years old. His family had went to a revival meeting. All the kids were up in the front several rows, and the preacher pointed his finger at the kids and said that their parents were going to heaven, and wouldn't it be a shame if you were left all alone without your parents! Fear is a powerful motivator. He became a Christian on the spot. Not because he believed in Jesus any more, but because he didn't want to lose his parents. Fear works. We are trained to respond to fear, through our school, through our jobs. John's way of conversion was through fear. Repent, for the kingdom of God is near! If you don't repent, you are in a lot of trouble. And people did repent, but I think it was out of fear, of selfish self-preservation and not out of a loving sincerity of asking for forgiveness.

And then Jesus comes along. Jesus used the almost same phrase as John. Repent for the kingdom of God has come near. But where John used fear as a motivator, Jesus used love. In this passage, Jesus didn't preach damnation and fire and brimstone! Jesus called people to repentance so that they might have real life! He didn't preach impending death, but he preached the flip-side, promising new life and true forgiveness. John had people repent under duress, which, I believe is not true repentance. When I broke a window as a kid, my parents made me apologize. I didn't feel sorry that I did it, but I did feel sorry that I was caught. I really wasn't sorry, but I was repenting to save my own hide. That was John's version of repentance. But Jesus's version of repentance is not one under duress, but out of the authentic desire to fix a broken relationship. John's says "Repent so you don't face consequences." Jesus says, "Repent so you might truly live!". There is a big difference, both seeking repentance, but using different means. This is commonly referred to as law verses grace. Are you under the law or are you under grace? When you are under the law, God is a judge who rewards those who are good and punishes those who are bad. And the sad part is, we are all bad. Or not perfect, there is always something that God can pin on us. A greedy action there, a lustful thought there, and we believe that God is keeping a tally on us to be used against us in a court of law. And retribution must be made. When you

are under grace, you believe in a forgiving God who accepts your repentance. Not because you are scared of the consequences, but because you sincerely know your sins and want to fix them. I mentioned Jim Wallis earlier, who had two conversions. One was out of fear. The next conversion he had was out of love. He was reading Matthew, Chapter 25, and came to the passage that read, "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was in jail and you visited me. I was naked and you clothed me. And the righteous will answer, "Lord, when did we see you and help you?" And the Lord replied, "Whatever you did for the least of these, you did unto me." Something clicked for Jim. He saw repentance as, not punishment to avoid out of fear, but as a way to fix the brokenness around us, to bring that Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven, to bring that kingdom of heaven something in the here and now. God, forgive me when I don't love as I should, help me to grow in love and Godliness! The main difference is intent. John wanted forgiveness for the sake of escaping judgement and wrath. Jesus wanted forgiveness for the sake of forgiveness itself! The most famous Bible verse sums it up well. John 3:16. For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. And the next verse adds, For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

A news story illustrates this quite well. Thousands of cars are stolen every year in California, but in 1981, there was one car theft that made all the local papers and was the lead story on the evening news. The police had issued an all-points bulletin to find the missing car and to make contact with the person who stole it. Why was this car theft making so much attention? The owner of the stolen car had informed the police that on the front seat of the car was a box of crackers laced with a deadly poison. The car owner had planned to use the crackers as rat bait. So the police were desperately trying to find the thief - not to punish him, but to save his life. They were afraid he would eat the crackers and die.

As you leave this morning from worship, ask yourself this question: Do you seek forgiveness out of fear of retribution and judgement? Is it forgiveness under duress? Do you go to church because you are afraid of the consequences if you don't? Do you try to patch up relationships because you can get something out of them? That was John's repentance. Repentance because of fear and "or else!". Instead, live out Jesus' repentance. With sincerity, seek forgiveness, not out of wrath's sake, but for conscience sake. John had disciples who followed him because they were scared. Jesus had disciples because of his love. And Jesus says to each of us, Follow me. I know where I am going. Have faith, and not fear. And I will lead you home.

And it's true: Jesus loves you, and me, more than we'll ever know. Thanks be to God. Amen.