

**2010 World Conference
Sunday, April 11 Communion Service**

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Listen and Fear Not!

Isaiah 43:1-7; Psalm 39

My recent trips to Haiti have allowed me to see scenes that are in bitter and striking contrast to the love that God expressed in creating the earth as an ideal place for life (Gen. 2:9). In its current state, “the earth is groaning in pain.” I’m not only talking about earthquakes. I **am** talking about the state of agitation and vulnerability our planet is experiencing today. It is obvious that our earth is groaning—groaning from global warming and its consequences. The various projections presented during earth summits make us shudder with the many threats that are on the horizon: icecaps melting, rising sea levels, species extinction, deterioration of ecosystems, change in rain patterns, scarcity of potable water, and extension of malaria zones. Before this dark and depressing picture, God the Eternal Creator weeps, along with *“the mothers and fathers in all nations who desperately seek a future of hope for their children”* (Section 163:4a). A scholar once said that the earth is running a fever and humankind is the virus. Also, a physicist said, “the more technology there is; the more people there are; the less nature there is; the fewer species there are; [and] the less creation there is”.

I hear these statements. They scare me! I have fear—extreme fear of the unknown! I fear economic instability and a probable staff reduction. I fear that the church will have to reduce its vibrant missionary ministries, resulting in lost opportunities for forming disciples of Jesus Christ. I fear that the quality of priesthood ministry might deteriorate, that it might languish because it has not received the education and training it needs to deliver competent ministries in the spirit of faithfulness to covenant. I fear that the youth won’t participate in the life and the ministries of the Church. I fear that various legislative initiatives might divide our international community. I fear because I have very limited knowledge—knowledge of cultures, opportunities, priorities, and missionary challenges in other apostolic fields. My fears multiply! I fear incurable diseases that are devastating Africa. I fear natural catastrophes like those just experienced in Karonga, Malawi, Haiti, and Chile. I fear wars, the military coups in Madagascar and Niger, the unceasing wars in Ethiopia, Sudan, Iraq, and Afghanistan that paralyze our planet. I have many fears, because all the concerns I have listed can adversely affect the mission and message of Jesus Christ for the church, in which he calls us to bring forth Zion, God’s peaceful kingdom on earth.

Our scriptural passage from Isaiah 43:1-7, is part of what is known as Second Isaiah. In this section, the prophet, while proclaiming salvation, corrects an important oversight and detour taken by the Israelites. Just like me, the Israelites were discouraged and resented that the Lord had apparently forsaken them (Is 40:27). They were a fearful, scattered, captive people. Isaiah reminds them of two reasons to hope. First, the Lord created the world, and God’s power

therefore shines throughout the universe. Second, and in like manner, the Lord chose Israel, and her faithfulness is to shine through history.

We today are prophetic people that are experiencing many of the same challenges that confronted Israel and caused her to fear. In spite of all the circumstances that generated fear, her ultimate testimony is that God is present with them, and they need not fear. Isaiah 43:1–7 is a wonderful testimony to the presence of God in all our lives. We too need to listen and hear the Lord’s message: “Fear not!”

The message of the prophet is to “listen to the voice of God with all of our heart, all of our soul and all of our strength!” God made a covenant with Israel that God will NOT break. We worship the presence of God with us not only in times of joy and peace, but also in times of storm and challenge—not out of fear but from God’s assurance. That is why the author of Psalm 29 affirms that the presence, the power, and the voice of God can be heard in the middle of the storm despite the fury of the elements, the winds, the rain, the lightning, and the thunderstorm that strike nature in her strength and majesty. Even ancient, solid trees succumb. It is in the storms of life today that the assurance of God’s presence brings hope. This hope lives today; I have seen it! I have heard and I have seen the **powerful testimony of faith and hope my Haitians brothers and sisters expressed through their singing and dancing after their beautiful nation was in ruin! They did not curse God. They understand that God’s love is not distant or cruel, but rather present, loving, and caring.** All of us who have experienced this blessing of peace, which is the peace of Jesus Christ, have the responsibility to share it with everyone, with brave confidence and without fear.

The following Buddhist proverb has much to teach us: “We have two ears and one mouth, to listen twice and speak once.”

The Israelites took a detour on their journey with God, prompting Isaiah the prophet to say: “O Israel: fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine! I am with you; I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west. I am with you. I [speak] to everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.” The truth celebrated here is found also in Romans 8. Paul declares emphatically that nothing can separate God’s children from God’s love. We need not live in fear—in fear of the present or the future. We can count on the presence of God with us, and we are assured by the clear Voice of God’s encouragement. The passage from the psalm is even more significant to us because it reinforces our hope as expressed in Doctrine and Covenants 163:2a: God invites us to listen and to “receive divine peace in the midst of difficult questions and struggles in life.” In Doctrine and Covenants 162, we are counseled nine times to LISTEN. “Listen to the voice” is the recurring theme of this revelation. Realizing God’s purpose in the midst of creation requires everything created to listen to the Creator. **We often choose to listen to what interests or pleases us, rather than listening to God, don’t we?** A hymn we use in many regions of our community asks the Spirit of the Living God to “form, mold, fill, and transform” us. That is

precisely the relationship God wants to share with each one of us as faithful disciples in the Community of Christ.

I was in Abidjan, Ivory Coast last month at a time when the government was disorganized. A police inspector came to my hotel and asked me why I was in his country. For the first time, I, a good Zambian citizen, was questioned about why I was there. Using the document "We share," I explained to him about our church identity, message and mission. When I was finished, the police inspector told me: "Pastor, I'm not Christian nor Muslim, and I have no desire whatsoever to become one or the other. However, I'm very moved by the message of your church, and I feel I should support what you are doing. Please, let me pay for your hotel room while you're staying in my country. And that's what he did! The police inspector, a total stranger at the beginning, became a friend. After listening to each other, we developed unconditional love, mutual respect, and unlimited trust. The wall of separation between us broke down. I remembered that God does not give us a spirit of fear, but of courage, love, and sound mind.

Maybe this short African story will clarify my point. In an African village, there lived two young men that grew tired of the principles, standards, traditions, and habits imposed by the elders. They decided to go away and hide in a town where life was less strict. People in the village did not like that at all. Unfortunately, both young men became sick, and they were sent back to their native village where they died. The village council had to decide whether they should be buried in the village graveyard that was surrounded by a fence. After a long discussion, the elders decided to bury them outside the fence of the graveyard. Something weird happened that night. Around midnight, the youth of the village moved the graveyard fence so that the two young men could be in the village graveyard. Their adventure put their lives at risk! Maybe this week we will be courageous enough as children of the Restoration to move fences in order to create new sacred communities! As Bishop Jim Kelsey stated "we are given change as an ingredient in life. We can be frightened and anxious and resistant to it or we can embrace it as a tool to transform us."

The table of the Lord is ready. I invite you to reflect on the powerful words of counsel from President Veazey. They express the faithfulness of our noble mission and can dispel our fear: "your continuing faith adventure with God has been divinely led, eventful, challenging, and sometimes surprising to you. By the grace of God, you are poised to fulfill God's ultimate vision for the church. When your willingness to live in sacred community as Christ's new creation exceeds your natural fear of spiritual and relational transformation, you will become who you are called to be. If you truly would be Community of Christ, then embody and live the concerns and passion of Christ. The challenges and opportunities are momentous. Will you remain hesitant in the shadows of your fears, insecurities, and competing loyalties?"

The feast is ready! I invite you to the table. I also invite everyone to move forward into the light of our calling and vision. We are divinely called to become an inclusive Community of Christ that understands passionately that **the mission of Jesus Christ is what matters most for the journey ahead. Praise be to God! Fear not!**