

# I Am with You

Acts 18:1–28

February 3, 2002

On Saturday morning, February 2, 2002, in the midst of what seemed to be an otherwise reasonably intelligent television news broadcast, the host brought on the numerologist from the staff of *Elle* magazine, whatever that is, and interviewed her about the significance of the numbers making up the date: 02-02-2002. She spoke with great passion, if not much understanding, about the emotional aspects of people born on that day, about the bright economic outlook of the nation in the days soon to come, and about a number of other prognostications. In fact, they spent a lot more time on her numerology than they had just spent on the news reporter who had been kidnaped and threatened with death in Pakistan.

There are a whole host of problems about this. One is that *Elle* magazine has a numerologist on its staff at all. Another is that a national television network program thought this was worth using valuable air time to broadcast. And perhaps the worst is that we live in a society that supports the other two decisions. We live in a strange world which increasingly disdains the truth of the revelation of Jesus Christ, the preaching of the gospel, and the wisdom of Christian teaching, a world which claims to be intelligent, sophisticated, modern or even post-modern, highly scientific, and technological, but nevertheless a world which pays good money for the nonsense of numerology.

By way of comparison, at least when the television networks bring on the people with that groundhog, Punxsutawney Phil, you can tell that everyone knows that the whole thing is a big show. And to be fair, I will say that the news host of the numerologist at least twice said that the numerology was “fun,” which at its best might be interpreted to mean that he thought it was utterly ridiculous. But it probably just meant that he was enjoying it. And they still broadcast it. And his guest numerologist was taking it entirely seriously. After all, that is her position on the staff of *Elle*. And as if to confirm all of this, in the afternoon I heard another national news person, on a radio program, interviewing yet another numerologist. What has the world come to? What does it mean that people take this kind of nonsense seriously?

Here we are, as the church of Jesus Christ, living in a world which is becoming increasingly strange and alien to us. In the face of this challenge, the only power the church has in the world is the power of the word. That is to say, we have only the power of persuasion. We have only the power of the truth. We have only the power of the good, presented convincingly. We have no civil power. We have no military power. We have no economic power. We have only the power of the word of God. Given this, we are to use it well. It is our job to speak the word of God faithfully, powerfully, winsomely, and effectively. It is our job to preach, to proclaim, and to persuade. The question is, how persuasive are we over against the competing claims of the world and in the face of the crying needs of the world? How convincing are we, not only to the leaders of the world, but to the great masses? After two-thousand years, one-third of the world's population is Christian. And yet, the United States media are consulting numerologists. How are we faring here in Richmond, and in Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church?

We are not the first to face such challenges. As Paul entered Corinth, it was a tremendous center of commerce and trading, legendary for its extravagant devotion to bodily pleasure and

debauchery. The task was daunting. The challenges were immense. While many pagans were converted, many opposed and reviled him. Then Paul received a special visitation and a special word of encouragement. “The Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, ‘Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man shall attack you to harm you; for I have many people in this city.’” The part about not getting harmed is not a general promise, for other Christians have been attacked, harmed, and killed. In fact, although Paul was granted this special protection for a time, at other times he was attacked, harmed, and arrested. But in today’s reading, his ministry proceeds unhindered. God is working his purpose out. Even in human difficulties, the gospel of Christ is advanced.

And so this word of God to Paul does set forth the work of Christian ministers in particular and of the church in general: “Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent.” Speak the word of God. Preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. Proclaim the good news to all the world. This is who we are and what we are about: we have received the grace of God, we are grateful to God for it, and so we share it graciously with each other. How well are we doing this today? What are the areas in which we can improve? How can we be more persuasive about the truth of God in Jesus Christ?

“Do not be afraid . . . for I am with you.” These words of God set off echoes of other words of God throughout the scriptures: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me,” Psalm 23:4; “Though a host encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war arise against me, yet I will be confident,” Psalm 27:3; and Jesus said, “I am with you always, to the close of the age,” the Great Commission, Matthew 28:20. They anticipate words which Paul wrote later: “If God is for us, who is against us? . . . For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord,” Romans 8:31, 38–39. This is a truth which runs throughout scripture. God is with us, and his presence provides reason for us not to be afraid.

The very fact that God told Paul not to be afraid indicates that Paul had good reason, from a human perspective, to be afraid. God would not have told him this otherwise. There were people who wanted to do him in. There were people who wanted to shut out the gospel. There were people who wanted to eliminate the preaching of God’s word. Paul knew this, and God knew this. But despite these good reasons to be afraid, by telling Paul not to be afraid, God gave Paul even better reason not to be afraid. By telling him this, God gave Paul courage, strength, and determination to carry on. So does he tell us that, in the face of all opposition, so long as we continue to obey God’s will and carry out his mission, God will not abandon us or forsake us.

“Do not be afraid . . . for I am with you.” “Do not be afraid . . . for I am.” God is, God is God, and God is with us. Here we have wave after wave of good news pouring out upon us. In a world of brokenness, alienation, and loneliness, it is good to know that God is with us. It is good to know that the underlying reality of our lives is not the distress that we see on the surface but is, instead, the abiding presence of God. It is good to know, despite everything that counts against it, that God is with us. It is good to know that the promised presence of God provides the basis for faith, hope, courage, and even fearlessness in facing the world.

From beginning to end, the burden of Paul’s preaching ministry was that the Christ was Jesus. He told of the crucifixion and the resurrection as the fulfillment of ancient prophecy and evidence of the presence and work of God. And the point of it was that the promised Christ had

come to us in the person of Jesus, which is to say that God has drawn near to us and is, as he promised, with us. This is the good news: The God and Father of Jesus Christ, the God in whom we live and move and have our being, is not far away but is, instead, with us, in Jesus Christ, in the preaching and hearing of the word, and in the Holy Spirit. In this we rejoice. In this we have courage for our lives today and good hope for the future.

We live in a strange world which increasingly disdains the truth of the revelation of Jesus Christ, the preaching of the gospel, and the wisdom of Christian teaching, a world which claims to be intelligent, sophisticated, modern or even post-modern, highly scientific, and technological, but nevertheless a world which pays good money for the nonsense of numerology. This is a world which is becoming increasingly strange and alien to us. And yet, it is into precisely such a context that God speaks these words: “Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man shall attack you to harm you; for I have many people in this city.”

*To God Almighty, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,  
be all praise, honor, and glory  
now and forever! Amen.*

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