

Thoughts in the Presence of Fear

Psalm 27

Third Sunday in Lent, (March 15) 2020

Kyle Childress

Pandemic

*What if you thought of it
as the Jews consider the Sabbath—
the most sacred of times?*

Cease from travel.

Cease from buying and selling.

*Give up, just for now,
on trying to make the world
different than it is.*

*Sing. Pray. Touch only those
to whom you commit your life.*

Center down.

*And when your body has become still,
reach out with your heart.*

*Know that we are connected
in ways that are terrifying and beautiful.
(You could hardly deny it now.)*

*Know that our lives
are in one another's hands.*

(Surely, that has come clear.)

Do not reach out your hands.

Reach out your heart.

Reach out your words.

*Reach out all the tendrils
of compassion that move, invisibly,
where we cannot touch.*

*Promise this world your love--
for better or for worse,
in sickness and in health,*

so long as we all shall live.

--Lynn Ungar 3/11/20

Howard Thurman once said, “Fear is one of the persistent hounds of hell that dog the footsteps of the poor, the dispossessed, and the disinherited” (*Jesus and the Disinherited*, p. 26). These days, this very week, indeed this very morning this hound of hell called fear is dogging all of us.

So hear the word of the Lord, “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?” (Ps.27:1).

The most frequent greeting by Jesus is “Fear not.” And the most frequent greeting by the angels of God is “Fear not” or “Be not afraid.” So whatever else you might hear this morning, hear the word from God: fear not. Don’t be afraid. Root our lives in the living God we know in Jesus Christ. He is our light and our salvation. He is the source of all that is good and loving and courageous in this world. Don’t be afraid.

I’m not suggesting that we do not have reason to fear. The Good Lord knows that we have plenty of reasons to be afraid, with this COVID-19 or coronavirus being the primary one right now. And because of our well-placed fear of this pandemic, you all are home, in a safer place, and I’m speaking to you this morning over the internet. We pray for each other and for others. We pray that this fear-filled pandemic will pass. We pray for healing and encouragement. We pray for strength. And we pray that we do not let our well-placed fear dominate our lives

and beat us down. Fear not. In other words, let's be afraid as God would have us and not allow fear to override everything else.

Fear in and of itself is not bad. Fear is a wake-up call. It arouses awareness of danger; it puts us on high alert. Yet it can also do just the opposite, overwhelming us and diminishing our alertness.

Seven hundred years ago Saint Thomas Aquinas said that fear causes us to contract in upon ourselves. He used the Greek term *systole*, from which we get our word systolic, which refers to the contracting of the heart muscle as it pumps blood. Fear, for Aquinas, can cause a kind of contraction of the heart. Fear draws us in on ourselves.

What a contrast to our calling as Christian to expand our hearts, not contract them.

So you can see what happens to us when we're afraid. Our life, our vision, our hearts contract in upon themselves and all we can see is what we're afraid of. It prevents us from imagining alternatives or coming up with solutions, much less paying attention to other things that need proper attention.

If we can do this as individual people, it's easy to see how this same dynamic is at work in society and in the nation: the heart of the country contracts. We turn inward on ourselves and can't imagine anyone or care for anyone else. The more political leaders play on our fears, the more we get tunnel vision. The more we contract our hearts.

We can also see why it is easy for so many people to flock to political leaders who promise us safety, who promise to return us to some imagined greatness when we were not afraid, and everything was “safe.”

The truth is we live in a difficult and dangerous world. It is not safe and never has been. Things like the coronavirus bring it out in the open. Our calling from God is to learn how to be afraid as followers of Christ and not be afraid like people who allow fear to dominate their lives and dominate our country. We do not want to fear in ways that cause us to get tunnel vision and causes our hearts to shrink in upon themselves. Learning how to be afraid as followers of Jesus has to do with being afraid for creation, for others – especially those who are weak and vulnerable – and for those considered outsiders.

I think it is safe to say that the favorite hymn of Austin Heights, and probably the favorite hymn of most churches in this country, is “Amazing Grace.” I’ve thought about the hymn this week, in particular the specific line that says, “Twas grace that taught my heart to fear/ And grace my fears relieved.” The writer of the hymn, John Newton, was saying that we are taught to fear and also, that our fears are relieved. It sounds strange to me. But I’ve reflected on it during the week and realize that both are true: we need to be taught to fear, while also seeking relief from fear.

And here’s the key, says John Newton: grace is what teaches us to fear and it is grace that relieves us of fear. In other words, proper fear, well-placed fear, is something we have to learn, and we learn it by the grace of God.

There are some things we should fear – like this contagion. To be fearless is to be foolish. We certainly do not want to catch it and more, we rightly fear spreading this virus. We rightly fear hurting others.

At the same time, the grace of God gives us courage in the midst of our fear, so that while we are afraid, we do not allow the fear to rule us or dominate us. As a friend of mine says, “Grace puts fear in its place” (see Scott Bader-Saye, *Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear*, p. 52).

To put fear in its place and not allow it to shrink our hearts and dominate our lives, what’s the answer? How can grace help us? How do we trust the living God to be our light and our salvation?

Irish theologian David Ford says our lives are shaped by “overwhelmings” and Ford says that these overwhelmings can be good – like the big and good experiences of having children, falling in love, great art, beauty, and so on. But other times we are overwhelmed by the bad. Fear that is out of place is one of those things that overwhelm us. Ford says that when dealing with overwhelmings it is not helpful to fiddle with details. In other words, it is not helpful stock up on toilet paper, or even stock up on guns and ammo. And it is also not helpful to just try to command ourselves to not be afraid. We cannot overcome fear by simple willpower. Explanation and argument will not take away our fears.

The only way to put fear in its place and not allow it to overwhelm us is for us to be overwhelmed by something bigger and better. “Amazing Grace” says that grace relieves our fears. And I John 4:18 says that love casts out all fear.

My word to you this morning is that we want to immerse ourselves in the grace and love of the living God, which will put fear in its proper place. The overwhelming grace and love of God will not take away all our fears, but it will help us learn to trust God more than we trust fear.

This is why Jesus never missed a chance to challenge us to not be afraid. Those who were afraid to leave home, the servant who buried his talent in a hole out of fear of losing it, the panicked disciples caught in a storm at sea, Peter's terror over failing to walk on water, the fear at the Transfiguration, the disciples cowering fear when the resurrected Jesus appeared among them on Easter evening and again a week later – all were met with a challenge to fear not, be not afraid (from Craig Barnes, *The Pastor as Minor Poet*, p. 99).

Trusting in the grace and love of the living God is something we must learn. We have to practice it. That's why I encourage you to do such things as beginning each morning with the Lord before you check your phone, before you check the news or social media. Immerse yourself in the living God of grace and love first.

Practice gratitude for God's grace – each morning. Practice love that comes from God – each day. Love God, love each other, love this creation, and as we learn more in the days to come, we will have opportunities to practice the love God gives us here in Nacogdoches and beyond.

And then I encourage you to reach out to each other. Call each other on the phone and check on each other. Pray for each other on the phone. Text and email and write notes to each other, encouraging one another and sharing the grace and love of God. God is our light and salvation; whom shall we fear?

Julian of Norwich is one of my exemplars. As Peggy Greer would say, “She is a “shero.” Julian of Norwich lived in England during some of the most catastrophic times of the 14th century. She lived the same time as Geoffrey Chaucer. This was during the front end of what is called the “Little Ice Age,” a time of climate change throughout the Earth’s northern hemisphere, resulting in long and wet winters in some places and prolonged drought in other places, and further resulting in food shortages due to crop failures. Hungry people were weakened people who were more susceptible to diseases that had previously been mostly unknown – primarily the Black Death, the bubonic plague, which killed 1/3 of the population of Europe. At the same time, famine and hunger and pandemic disease caused great political ferment and war. England and France fought each other for one hundred years, and there was the Peasants Revolt in England. Meanwhile, there was little leadership provided by the church as the papacy was also fighting among itself and was split with rival popes in Rome and Avignon, France.

Living in the middle of all this was this young woman, Julian, who at age 30 was gravely ill and thought she was dying. She was looking at the cross in order to receive comfort as she died, and she received a vision of God. Part of the vision was a tiny thing in her hand, like a small, brown, hazelnut. She realized that the small, round thing, “is everything that is made.” It was all creation. And she wondered why this fragile and insignificant thing did not crumble before her eyes. She was told, “God made it. God loves it. God keeps it.”

Well, she didn’t die. For the next fifteen years she immersed herself in God and prayed about this vision she had received. Why had she received it? What did

it mean? What did it mean in the midst of all of the overwhelming catastrophes around her?

After fifteen years she received another vision. And in this one God told her, “Love is God’s meaning. All that God does is love, and therefore, “that all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.”

So she wrote all of this down. And she wrote of all her reflections on these visions. And she wrote all this for others, for regular people to read, so she wrote not in Latin, but in English. Julian of Norwich wrote the first book in English by a woman.

Six hundred years later, during World War II, while bombs were falling on London and things looked dark. When people were losing hope and they were afraid, T.S. Eliot remembered Julian of Norwich’s words, “All shall be well/ and all manner of things shall be well” including them in his great poem *Little Gidding*.

God had shown Julian the whole dangerous world in the palm of her hand. Paying attention to it, she learned how God paid attention to her. Holding it, she learned how God held her.

God holds us, too.

“The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?”

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,

Mother of us all. Amen.