

FEAR AND SUPERSTITION

Psalm 4 & Luke 24: 36-48
04/14/24 Dean Feldmeyer

Edward Shillito, was a British minister who served in the army in World War I. He experienced, up close, the horrors of warfare as it entered the modern age, and he was traumatized by the massive death and destruction that he encountered.

Upon surviving the war and returning home, he entered the ministry and, reflecting upon that experience, wrote the poem, "Jesus of the Scars:"

If we have never sought, we seek Thee now;
Thine eyes burn through the dark, our only stars;
We must have sight of thorn-pricks on Thy brow,
We must have Thee, O Jesus of the Scars.

The heavens frighten us; they are too calm;
In all the universe we have no place.
Our wounds are hurting us; where is the balm?
Lord Jesus, by Thy Scars, we claim Thy grace.
If, when the doors are shut, Thou drawest near,
Only reveal those hands, that side of Thine;
We know to-day what wounds are, have no fear,
Show us Thy Scars, we know the countersign.
The other gods were strong; but Thou wast weak;
They rode, but Thou didst stumble to a throne;
But to our wounds only God's wounds can speak,
And not a god has wounds, but Thou alone.

If you recognize the poem, it may be because it is the one with which I closed last week's sermon. I use it to open this week's sermon because the text for this week is, essentially, Luke's version of the John passage we read last week. It is the first appearance of Jesus to his gathered disciples, after the resurrection.

In John, you will recall, from last week's reading, they were gathered together in the upper room. Here, in Luke, they are simply gathered together. In John, the resurrected Christ has to overcome the doubt of one of his disciples, Thomas by name. In Luke, it is fear and superstition of all the disciples that he must overcome. Fortunately, for them and us, he knows exactly how to do that.

FEAR AND SUPERSTITION ON THE EASTER TRAIL

We celebrate Easter as a festival.

We put on our Easter finery, we sing hymns of hope, we eat sweets and fatted hams. Our children search for Easter Eggs, some with prizes hidden within. The anthem is jubilant. The sermon is always positive, hopeful and uplifting.

But look at the Easter texts in the gospels and we discover that while the good news is always met with joy, there is a healthy dose of fear as well.

This is most obvious in Mark's version of the story which abruptly ends when the women go home and say nothing to anyone because they are afraid. In Matthew we are told that the guards who were standing by the tomb "shook with fear and became like dead men" and the women "departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy and ran to report it to his disciples." In John's account the disciples meet in a locked room out of fear. Fear also has a prominent position in this morning's passage from Luke's gospel.

Twice the disciples have been told of the resurrection – once by Peter and once by the two men who encountered the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus. But when Jesus actually appears to them in the flesh their reaction is one of fear and superstition. "They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost." (vs. 37)

Fear and superstition. Let's talk about those for a moment.

At a moderate level, fear and anticipatory anxiety can be good things.

They keep us sharp and on our toes. They make us ask the questions that lead us to the answers that make our lives work well. How will I pay the bills? How much should I eat? What time should I go to bed? How fast or slow should I drive?

Fear of heights keeps us from walking too close to the edge. Fear of pain keeps us from touching the hot stove.

But when fear and anxiety become chronic, they are detrimental to not just our mental health but our physical health as well. When we worry too much our blood pressure goes up, we over eat or drink, we work too hard and forget to rest. We lose our playfulness and our spontaneity. We become sour and dour. We begin to live as under a dark cloud.

This is true of individuals, but it is also true of groups, of families, sports teams, neighborhoods, communities and even nations. And it's true of churches. Chronic worry and anxiety ruin the health of the system.

Lately, we have seen the truth of this assertion in the United States as we approach the presidential election in November. Political parties small and large are warning us that we should be worried about what will happen if the other party is victorious. The campaign emphases placed on the economy, terrorism, and national security are all nods to fear and anxiety that already run rampant in our culture.

In Florida and other states, fear of crime and criminal activity, has led to the "Stand Your Ground" law that allows citizens the right to kill people to protect their property and themselves when they have a "reasonable fear" that their life or property is in danger. But the word "reasonable" has often been left out of the discussion as acquittals pile up not because the shooters had a reasonable fear but because they had any fear at all.

In the United Methodist Church, all eyes are turning toward Charleston at the end of this month as our quadrennial governing body, The General Conference, meets to deal with the fear generated by decades of shrinkage in membership. And we all, liberals and conservatives, are afraid of what may or may not be done by the GC in their nearly frantic effort to plug the leaks. Who will they blame? Who will they try to change? Who will control the church for the next four years and what will that mean to me, and more importantly, my pension?

At the center of the debate will be the big three of denominational fear and anxiety: sexuality, finances, and change. And those fears are affecting more than the church. Our entire culture is in a constant state of fear and anxiety over sexuality, war, terrorism, finances, health care, and change.

So, what do we do? How do we confront those fears before they destroy the things we hold most precious: our freedom, our country, our church, our family?

THE COST OF FEAR

Luke's account tells us one of the reasons that chronic fear and anxiety are so destructive: People tend to deal with their fears by turning to superstition.

"They thought they saw a ghost."

Let me confess, right here, before we go any further, that I do **NOT** believe in ghosts. And the reason I do not believe in ghosts is that I have never encountered any evidence that I consider to be convincing. I cannot prove that there are no such things as ghosts. It is, after all, impossible to prove a negative. But I can say that everything that has ever been given to me as evidence of the existence of ghosts can be explained by other, simpler, more natural means. And according to the philosophical and scientific principle known as Occam's Razor, the simplest explanation is almost always the right one.

So, I do not believe that dead people re-enter the world of the living and move things around or change the hands of clocks or wander around the house searching for whatever it is that they search for. I believe that the belief in ghosts is often a reflection of our fear that the deceased have been taken from us forever, that we will never see them again and they are forever lost to us, a notion that flies in the face of classical Christianity.

Other superstitions are also reflections of our fears. When we put our faith in pyramids, or crystals, or séances, or Ouija boards, or runes, or tea leaves, or palmists, or mediums, or the intestines of sacrificial animals, we are admitting that we are afraid and we are searching desperately for something that will assuage our fears – preferably something that is cheap, simple, easy, and readily available. And, if someone else, someone from the past, has also believed in that thing, so much the better. Antiquity often bestows respectability, does it not?

I believe that the "Stand Your Ground" laws that are so much in the news these past few years are contemporary example of this kind of superstition. Even though the FBI assures us that the crime rate in nearly every area and in nearly every state in the union is going down,

we still insist on being afraid of crime and criminals, and we desperately want to hope that we can create a safe, secure, peaceful environment by constantly threatening each other with more and more guns and violence.

When we are afraid, when we are confronted with the threat of meaninglessness, we tend to latch desperately onto the first thing that comes along and promises to assuage or at least give some kind of meaning to our suffering and pain, our fear and our loss, and often the first and easiest thing to come along is a shallow superstition that will not, in the long run, stand up to the punishing vicissitudes of real life.

As Christian people whose **faith is in Jesus Christ and his resurrected body, the church**, we have a responsibility to offer our brothers and sisters a palliative for their fears that is also an alternative to superstition. And it is Jesus who gives us, through his example, that palliative and alternative.

Jesus does not confront the fear and superstition of the apostles with reason and logic. He doesn't try to prove their position wrong or argue them out of it with the witty and clever application of his superior intellect and his more excellent point of view.

Rather, he applies to this situation, a liberal dose of intimate self-disclosure. He shows them his scars. And then he sits down and eats with them.

WE OF THE SCARS

See, we are all afraid. We have all been hurt and are afraid of being hurt again.

We all worry. We know the anxiety of not knowing, of what might be, of the worst-case scenario.

There is no parent who has not experienced that nightmare so horrific that, upon waking from it, we are compelled to go to our children's rooms just to reassure ourselves that they are okay and, perhaps stand for a moment, watching them breath and praying a silent prayer of thanks. Garrison Keillor once said that to be a parent is to resign yourself to a life of worry, and I have never met a parent whose children were so old that this was not the case.

Psychologist and Rabbi, Edwin Friedman, a proponent of "systems theory," believed, and I think he was right, that all systems – families, companies, baseball teams, churches, church choirs, nations, take your pick, tend to function the same. And he defined an effective leader as "the non-anxious presence in an anxious system." But then he added this caveat: "All systems are, by nature, anxious." People in our culture run from thing to thing, religion to religion, superstition to superstition, trying to find something that will give meaning to their lives and the difficulties that life throws at them. Charlatans get rich, snake-oil salesmen grow fat, politicians get elected, and preachers – yes, preachers – fill the pews and offering plates of their churches by either telling people that their fears are justified, or by telling them that the solution to their fears is simple, cheap, and easy.

And, often, we are so desperate that we will cling to shallow, insubstantial things that will break loose and leave us unsupported when we need them the most.

Brothers and sisters, those fearful, hopeless people need us.

The world needs what we have. The world needs to let go of its chronic fear, its endless anxiety, and its pointless, ineffective superstitions and come to a saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. And it needs for us to lead them to that knowledge.

The temptation for us will be to follow what we see on the “religion” shelves at the local book store. There we find every kind of author, thinker, pundit and pop theologian making “the case for” Jesus, Christianity, and religion in general and arguing against atheism, agnosticism, existentialism, and humanism. It is as though we will eventually come up with an argument so clever and convincing that we will be able to convert people by just talking the talk and not worrying about walking the walk.

Of course, that has never been and probably never will be the case. Reason, rhetoric, and argument are all well and good. They are fun and they help us build and strengthen our own faith but they rarely convince anyone else.

I have heard dozens of Roman Catholic theologians make their case for the superiority of Catholicism but those who really made me wonder if it was true were Mother Theresa, and Father Damien, and Archbishop Oscar Romero.

I am well and widely known in this conference as the liberal bane of all fundamentalists and evangelicals, and I am. I will argue theology and biblical interpretation with them all day long. But when evangelicals like Tony Campollo and Greg Boyd and Shane Clairborne and Jim Wallis speak, I shut up and listen, not because of the way they frame their arguments but because of the way they live their lives. They are consistently and sacrificially Christian in nearly everything they say and do and I want to be like them.

I have debated theology with colleagues of different Christian denominations but I never debated donuts. When we sit down together over crullers and coffee, we are suddenly all just children of God.

Jesus showed them his scars and then he ate with them. And their fear vanished and they had no need for superstition.

God grant us the courage and the strength to do as Jesus did. To share with our fearful brothers and sisters the scars which define us as his disciples, and the willingness to eat, as he did, with tax collectors and sinners.

Lord Jesus, by Thy Scars, we claim Thy grace.
 If, when the doors are shut, Thou drawest near,
 Only reveal those hands, that side of Thine;
 We know to-day what wounds are, have no fear,
 Show us Thy Scars, we know the countersign.

The other gods were strong; but Thou wast weak;
They rode, but Thou didst stumble to a throne;
But to our wounds only God's wounds can speak,
And not a god has wounds, but Thou alone.

AMEN