

Good Friday 2021

April 2, 2021

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Fear is a powerful force in our world, and it's everywhere. It keeps us from doing all kinds of things, and it makes us do some terrible things. Fear prevents us from loving our neighbors. It keeps us from reaching out across divisions, from breaking down barriers so that we can love and serve those in need.

Fear is a favorite tactic of politicians and news pundits. Politicians tell us that if you don't vote for them, then the other candidates will ruin our country. News commentators want you to believe that if you don't listen to everything they say, then you will put your health and your safety in danger. And these individuals will say just about anything, even if it's false, as long as they can get an emotional and fearful reaction.

Fear even invades our churches. So many churches seek to get new members by putting the fear of God into people. Think about the messages you hear in some churches. "Have you accepted Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior?" Because if you haven't then you will be sentenced to eternal condemnation. Other say, "The world is coming to an end. Do you know where you'll spend eternity?" So many churches are simply seeking to sell you fire insurance—come to church, make a choice for Jesus, get your life in order and do what we say so that you don't burn in hell. For many churches, faith and religious affiliation is all about fear.

In today's world, we are afraid of many things. In addition to the fear tactics that our world uses, fear seeks to invade everything we believe in and value. We're afraid of being vulnerable because we don't want to be used. We're afraid of change because we don't know exactly how things will turn out. We're afraid of commitment because we might end up giving more than our fair share.

In our world right now, we're seeing fear of immigrants, fear of those who identify as transgender, fear of the COVID vaccines and science, and many other things. And our fear causes us to put others in danger. We put others in danger because our fear has led to hatred and violence, or because our fear leads us to make poor choices for our community's health and safety.

And we find plenty of things to fear in our lives of faith too. We're afraid the church will run out of money. We're afraid that our aging congregation doesn't have enough young people to carry it into the future. We're afraid that the pandemic has accelerated the church's decline throughout the country. We're afraid that the individualism of our culture means that people see no need to participate in a church community. Fear can easily become part of everything we think and do.

Fear was all over the place in the New Testament times, too. Fear of catching diseases forced those with leprosy out of the city, away from everyone else, where they couldn't spread their illness. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, fear of becoming ritually unclean prevented the priest and the Levite from caring for the man who was hurt on the side of the road.

And fear is what brought us to hang Jesus on the cross. The Romans and all the authorities were afraid of this man who called himself a king. They were afraid of the people who called him King, and Master, and Lord. They were afraid that their power was in jeopardy. They were worried that this new guy on the scene would be a threat to their throne. They were afraid that Jesus was teaching people that they didn't have to pay taxes and observe the laws of the land. They were afraid of what this would do to their kingdom and to their income.

The leaders of the synagogues were afraid that Jesus was drawing people away from the Jewish faith. They were afraid that Jesus was teaching people that they didn't have to observe Jewish laws. They were afraid that Jesus was criticizing the temple practices. They were afraid that their business of selling animals for sacrifices was going to come to an end and they would lose this source of income. They were afraid that Jesus was making changes, and speaking against the voice of tradition. They were afraid that things wouldn't always stay exactly the same as they've always been.

Fear has the power to motivate everything we do. And fear leads us to make poor decisions and to do terrible things. The most fearful moment in all of history is what led us to hang Jesus on the cross. Fear left him there to die alone. Fear locked his followers in a room, afraid to love and serve as Jesus commanded them.

But God's love is stronger than fear. God took that most fearful moment in all of history and turned it into a story of love—a story of salvation, a story of forgiveness, a story of eternal life. God has the power to transform the worst moment in history—Jesus' death on the cross—into something that we are able to call “good”.

On this most holy night, tradition dictates that we gather in sorrow, that we mourn the death of our Lord. That we look at the cross on which we see our sins hang in the body of Christ. But on this most holy night, we also gather with joy in the triumph of the cross.

This night is the night in which God in Christ shows us how much God loves us. God sends God's only Son to die on the cross because that's how much God loves us. God puts our needs before God's own, God acts on behalf of us. We put God's son on the cross to die, and God uses that very moment to remove our sin, to make us clean, to grant us salvation and eternal life.

This is the night on which God draws all people to God's self in the one body of Christ. We heard just a couple Sundays ago, and a few chapters ago in the Gospel of John, as Jesus proclaims, “and I, when I am lifted high above the earth, will draw all people to myself.” Tonight, we set aside our fear, as God draws us together as a community of love. A community that has nothing to fear because God conquers fear, transforming it into love.

The world wants us to live in fear. And it is easy to be afraid. But with God, we have the ability to trust that everything rests in God's hands. And so, in the face of fear, we are called to love. As Jesus commanded us last night: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” Sometimes loving one another means putting our fear in God's hands, trusting that God will provide for us and care for us so that we can reach out and love one another. We are not called to close ourselves off and hide away in fear. We are called to reach beyond ourselves and care for all people despite our fear.

This is God's call for our lives. And tonight, we see God take the product of our fearfulness—Jesus' death on the cross—and transform it into a story of love. Tonight God draws us to the cross where we hung our savior. We gather at the foot of the cross in God's story of love, and we receive forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life. Tonight, God comes to us in the midst of fear, and sin, and death, and the death of God's beloved Son, and God triumphs, sharing with all of us the gift of love. The fears of the world have been conquered by God in the death of Christ. All things belong to God. All things rest in God's loving care of all creation. We are set free from our sinfulness and our fear, and we are called to live in the love and mercy that God grants to us. Thanks be to God. Amen.