

The Church of the Good Shepherd

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Luke 12:32-40

Fear is a curious thing. Growing up, I was deeply and seriously afraid that something was going to get me on the stairs at home. My bedroom was downstairs at the end of the hallway, away from my parents' bedroom and from the family living spaces. Walking the hallway would make me uneasy, but it was something about the staircase that truly triggered the fear. While the fear was much greater at night with the dark, it never went entirely away in the light of day. I knew it was irrational – it's not like anything had ever happened. I didn't even know what I was afraid was going to get me. Nonetheless, as soon as I started up the stairs, the fear of "it" began to grow. It started as just a spark but quickly the flames of fear were fanned into a bonfire and before I knew it, I was running up the stairs. Reaching that top step, I entered the safety zone and I could breathe easier as soon as my foot reached it. "It" could not get me now.

The thing is, I knew better. In my head I knew there was no threat – no "it" waiting to grab me – and yet my heart would pound and my legs would fly up the steps. Eventually, I out-grew this fear but I've never forgotten how it felt to be overwhelmed with fear.

Now I am an adult, there seems to be so much to legitimately fear: terrorism; war; the economy; global climate change; random mass violence; hate crimes; unemployment, hunger, poverty, homelessness; disease and death. It is impossible to escape: walk the neighborhoods, drive the interstates, the signs are all around. Even if you stay home, you are bombarded by newscasters and an endless supply of pundits breathlessly sharing the breaking headlines of bad news. With the ubiquity of social media and text alerts, we are hounded continually no matter where we are. Whether fake news or not, we are assured that it is frightening news which only ratchets up our current culture of fear.

Merriam-Webster defines fear as "an unpleasant often strong emotion caused by anticipation or awareness of danger." Fear is a vital response to physical and emotional danger; it has strong roots in human evolution. If people didn't feel fear, they couldn't protect themselves from legitimate threats, which in the ancient world frequently resulted in life-or-death consequences. In the modern world, however, individuals often fear situations where the stakes are much lower, but their body and brain may still treat the threat as lethal. This can trigger an extreme, and often unnecessary, fight-flight-or-freeze response.

Writer and commentator David Brooks wrote in the New York Times in April of this year, "I wonder if we've fully grasped how fear pervades our society and sets the emotional tone for our politics. When historians define this era, they may well see it above all else as a time defined by fear." Brooks writes that this era has seen politicians rise by stoking fear, and this fear has then been magnified and projected everywhere by social media and the voracious cacophony of 24-hour news cycles. As Brooks continues, "We get to the point where the fear itself begins to take control. Fear generates fear. Everybody feels besieged."

It is to us in the midst of this toxic culture of fear that Jesus speaks these words of comfort this morning: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." This comfort is no mere whistling in the dark – Jesus offers the reassurance that what is seen is not all that is. This is the comfort that, as Paul writes to the Hebrews, "is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." (*Hebrews 11:1*) In other words, this is the comfort of faith.

"Do not be afraid;" "fear not;" "do not fear." Words like these, exhorting us not to fear, appear over 300 times in our scriptures. In fact, they represent the most repeated exhortation in the bible,

which speaks volumes about the ubiquity of the presence and the destructive impact of fear in the human condition.

Fear is contagious and insidious. Like an airborne virus, fear is transmitted from person to person with remarkable speed. In a crowd, you can feel fear washing over people and quickly transforming a peaceful gathering to a destructive mob.

Fear puts a dark filter over everything and perverts our vision. The fearful person is unable to hear good news while any possible threat looms large. Fear runs ahead of the facts and inflames the imagination, so that the majority of the time we're not afraid of what is actually happening to us, but of some catastrophic thing our imagination tells us might happen. When in the state of fear, all we can see is an economy of scarcity and limited resources. Fear reduces every interaction to a zero-sum game and our vision of God's economy of abundance is obscured. It causes the hoarding of resources rather than the sharing of blessings.

Fear erodes human relationships and prevents us from trusting. Fear causes us to isolate ourselves. It closes us down and hardens our hearts. When in a state of fear, we forget that we all, each and every one of us, are beloved children of God. We are unwilling to live into Jesus' commandment to love one another and he loved us. We are unable to see each other with the eyes of God and thus refuse to "seek and serve Christ in all people."

Most importantly, fear stokes anger, which then stokes more fear. Fear is so powerful that it drives out all thoughts of others, causing the fearful person to reject any compassionate response to social problems and instead lash out in anger and hate. Worse yet, as Brooks points out, "fear causes us to no longer see particular individuals, rather only hateful shades who arouse disgust and can be blamed. Muslims are disgusting. Immigrants are disgusting. Republicans are disgusting. This disgust necessarily dehumanizes individuals which underlies many social evils." The encompassing nature of fear can be so overwhelming that we might do well to remind ourselves of the words of President Franklin Roosevelt, "*The only thing we have to fear, is fear itself.*"

Over and again, God calls us to a different way – the way not of fear but the way of love. In his first letter to John, Paul writes, "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them... There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear." (1 John 4:16b, 18a) If, as I believe, fear is love that has been malformed and corrupted, then it follows that love – divine and human love – casts out fear. The love that Jesus calls us to live and share is the Love that redeems, reclaims, and transforms our fear.

As the antidote for fear, love functions much like fear's inverse. Love builds and strengthens human relationships and trust. Love softens and opens up our hearts to the other, making generous room there for those we never expected to take up residence. Love clarifies our vision to see God's economy of abundance that functions behind the apparent economy of scarcity. Love reminds us that in this world, things are not always what they seem. Even though we may feel that we are limited in our capacity to love, we are shown time and again that there is infinite space within our hearts. While the world seems to be one in which we are always competing for limited resources and there is never enough, love reveals the surprising reality of God's continual gracious abundance that is the deeper truth.

Conventional wisdom would suggest that fearlessness is the corrective for our culture of fear. Perhaps we would be better served to consider courage. To be fearless is to not feel fear, but to be courageous is to choose to act even while frightened. Perhaps courage is the path from fear to love. Perhaps living love means to have the courage to love in world that often seems unlovable. The courage to be compassionate in a world that often seems to punish compassion and reward greedy hoarding. The courage to behold and embrace another who seems so different from you... who frightens you... who thinks differently than you... who looks different than you.

Have we the courage to live lives of faith? Faith that we each are lovable not because of what we do but because of who God is. Faith in God's love for us. Faith that, nourished and enriched by

the divine love, we are able to live in love – with God and each other. Faith that despite the fear that swirls all around us, infecting our hearts and closing us off to each other, that there is a greater, deeper, and more expansive truth abiding.

I would like to conclude with my very favorite prayer from our prayer book. When I am threatened to be overwhelmed by the toxicity of our culture of fear, this is the prayer I find myself turning to.

Let us pray.

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and fear which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.