

Faith Beyond Fear

Over the past few days, I've been thinking a lot about fear. When we read the story of Jesus's Passion in John's Gospel on Good Friday, it struck me that almost everyone involved in his Crucifixion was driven by fear. The disciples were so afraid of the Temple authorities that, according to Mark and Matthew, they fled when Jesus was arrested. Peter was so afraid for his own safety that, when questioned, he vehemently denied knowing the person he loved best in the world. The Temple authorities were so afraid of the Romans that they decided to kill Jesus to prevent an uprising that Pilate would be certain to suppress brutally. Even Pilate seems to have been afraid, though it's hard to know whether he was more afraid of what the Judeans would do if he crucified the rabbi who had become such a popular favorite, or of the Emperor if he failed to keep order or, Heaven forbid, appeared to be less than perfectly loyal. And let's not forget others who might have defended Jesus – Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, for example – but who chose instead to play it safe, allowing Jesus to go to an agonizing death.

But there's one group of people in this story who were almost certainly afraid, but who never surrendered to their fear: the women who followed Jesus from Galilee. There is no version of the Gospel in which these women denied Jesus. There is no version of the Gospel in which they abandoned Jesus to save themselves. These women stood fast. They went with him through his trial and Crucifixion. They bore witness to his suffering and death. And, at the first opportunity after Jesus's lifeless body had been placed in his tomb, the women went to ensure that he received a proper burial, no matter what the authorities might do to punish them.

Imagine their shock when the women came to the tomb to find the stone rolled away and no one inside. Luke tells us that the sudden appearance of two angels shocked them. Yet, though the women were frightened, the angels didn't address them as messengers of God usually greet

terrified mortals by saying, “Don’t be afraid.” Instead, the angels went straight to the point, asking the women why they were looking for the living among the dead. They reminded them of what Jesus had said about rising again. Then, either the angels disappeared, or the women didn’t even bother to say goodbye before they rushed back to tell the disciples their stupendous news.

We might wonder why the angels didn’t tell the women not to fear. Perhaps they had finally realized that telling people not to feel whatever they’re feeling doesn’t accomplish much. Or, if they had been watching from heaven, perhaps the angels knew that these women were so strong that they would do whatever needed to be done, no matter how frightened they were. Or perhaps, just perhaps, Jesus’s death on the cross marked a fundamental shift in humanity’s relationship with God, so that, if we allow the Holy Spirit to work in our hearts, we’ll realize that we no longer have any reason to be afraid of anything.

We can see the shift beginning with Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. They were both members of the Sanhedrin, powerful men who could presumably do whatever they liked. During Jesus’s lifetime, they had both been believers. John tells us, though, that Nicodemus was so afraid to be seen with Jesus that he visited him by night, and Joseph of Arimathea kept his belief in Jesus secret because he feared the Temple authorities which, in this case, means Annas and Caiaphas. After Jesus was crucified, however, neither of them seemed to give two hoots anymore about what anybody thought. Joseph went right over Caiaphas’s head to ask Pilate for Jesus’s body. Nicodemus arrived with an enormous quantity of burial spices, and the two of them openly prepared Jesus for a hasty burial and placed him in Joseph’s own tomb. Suddenly, they were able to put faith before fear, doing what was right instead of sticking to what was safe. And then, there was Peter, who had been so afraid that he denied even knowing Jesus to protect himself. But when presented with the possibility that Jesus might still be alive, Peter burst out of hiding and

ran to the tomb, not caring who saw him. He, too, suddenly could put his faith before his fear. And, as we'll see in the coming weeks, the other disciples also found their courage. After meeting their risen Lord, out they went to spread the Gospel across the Mediterranean world.

So, what does all of this mean for us as modern followers of Christ? As Bishop +Carrie told her clergy earlier this week, in a season where Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde's sermon on unity and mercy has been condemned by some as "too political," it's hard to talk about our current circumstances. There are many who find hope in the changes that are taking place. If you're among them, please hold onto your hope, share it with your fellow Christians, and indulge me as I speak to those who don't share your perspective. If you're frightened by the upheaval in our society, know that you're not alone. Our world has always held its dangers but, as the media constantly point out, people are drowning in fear right now. Budget cuts and layoffs have put tens of thousands of federal employees and contractors out of work, along with many who worked for the businesses that supported them. Cuts to benefits, grants, and social services have schools, hospitals, libraries, and food banks scrambling for resources. Turmoil in the financial markets is decimating retirement savings. Changes in immigration policies have escalated people's fears of losing loved ones to deportation or being deported themselves. Elimination of DEI programs warns those who have been historically disadvantaged that their ancestral stories are not to be repeated, and they'd better be prepared to fend for themselves, because there will be no help from our institutions. It can feel dangerous to speak, to act, even to *exist*, should you happen to be someone who doesn't fit a particular mold or favor a particular point of view. And as all of this is happening, fear tempts us to hide away, play it safe, and let the principalities and powers of this time inflict whatever damage they choose as they strive to escalate their might and line their pockets at the expense of everyone else.

The Temple authorities were right to fear the Romans. In 70 A.D., the Roman Empire slaughtered the people of Jerusalem and tore down the Temple, just as Jesus predicted. Today, that supposedly invincible Roman Empire is long gone, proving that no human institution is eternal. Thanks be to God, Jesus is. As Paul reminded the Romans, “We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him.” That means, as Paul reminds us, that “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, 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.” And *that* means, no matter how terrifying things might seem, that we have nothing to fear.

We can say that Christianity was born at various moments in history, from Jesus’s birth to the Holy Spirit’s descent at Pentecost. But we shouldn’t overlook the moment when a handful of faithful women – Mary, mother of James, Joanna, and Mary Magdalene –put their fear aside to serve our Savior. They can inspire us, whether we’re frightened or not, to meet the challenges of this season with courage and compassion. So, this evening, as we, like the women and Peter, contemplate the empty tomb and what it means in our lives, we can also ask ourselves the question of the angels. Why would we look for the living among the dead, or seek mercy from those who pride themselves on their mercilessness? We don’t require their power or their mercy because we already have all that we need. Jesus has shown us that, even when things seem to be at their worst, God is always working for the good, and God’s goodness always prevails. We need only let faith guide us to whatever the Holy Spirit calls us to do for one another. And we need to share our hope because, as Bishop +Carrie also said, when we point to hope, we point to God. So, dear friends, as we await the dawn of Easter morning, please rejoice with me, fearlessly saying Alleluia, Christ is risen! Thanks be to God and amen.