

Sermon for Pentecost 3 Year A 2020
We Are to Fear, Love, and Trust God Above All Things

What are you afraid of?
What fills you with dread?
What keeps you up at night, worrying?
In these times of financial uncertainty,
social isolation,
cultural upheaval,
and worldwide illness,
I am certain the answers to these questions are legion.
We fear impoverishment.
We fear Covid-19.
We fear violence.
We fear suffering.
We fear death.

As we wrestle with our fears,
most of us turn to our faith to find fear's opposite—peace.
We profess our faith in Jesus, the Prince of Peace.
We pray that God will grant us “the peace that passes all understanding.”
We greet each other saying, “the peace of the Lord be with you always.”
Most of us assume or think of Christianity as a religion of peace.
A religion of peace-making, peace-loving, and peace-keeping.

So it's a bit jarring to hear what our Lord, the Prince of Peace,
says to us in this morning's gospel:
Do you think that I have come to bring peace to earth?
I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

What are we to make of these words?
Indeed, what are we to make of all the readings we just heard this
morning which fairly explode off the page with dire,
Provocative language that sounds anything but peaceful?
The prophet Jeremiah describes God's presence in his life as fire—
a burning fire shut up in my bones.

The psalmist writes that her faith makes her an object of shame, gossip, insult, and reproach to her community.

Paul reminds us that our commitment to Christ requires us not simply to be nice people . . . but to consider ourselves utterly “dead to sin.”

And in our gospel, Jesus speaks of exposed secrets, broken homes, heavy crosses, and lost lives.

In short, these texts not just invite us but they compel us to move beyond a sweet, sentimental Christianity and to wrestle with the hard, high costs of discipleship.

Here’s what we need to keep in mind—texts are descriptive rather than prescriptive.

That means they describe in honest, unflinching terms what will happen if we dare to take our faith seriously.

What will happen in our families, our communities, our churches, and our world if we allow the “fire” of God’s word to burn through us.

The bottom line is this:

If “tender Jesus, meek and mild” is what we prefer, then this week’s lectionary is not for us.

If a faith that does not propel us to let the love of God in Christ lead us to stand up for what is right, to confront systemic evils in our institutions and in our governing, to speak and to act on behalf of the poor then I think we have misunderstood who Jesus is and what Christianity is all about.

If you and I or anyone without our sphere of influence has ever been provoked, disturbed, surprised, or challenged by how we live our faith—then, I think Jesus is saying to us today, your life of faith—who we fear, love and trust—is out of order.

And so, God’s word to us today offers more riches to us than we can count.

Perhaps it is best to highlight, then, a few key phrases and consider what they say to us about fear, peace, and faith.

The prophet Jeremiah says,
The Lord is with me like a dread warrior.
Jeremiah uses this phrase to describe the presence of God in his life.
At the outset, it made me wince.
Some of you may have grown up with
what is called “fire and brimstone” preaching.
I’ve heard a bit of this kind of preaching myself through the years.
I know what it’s like to envision God as harsh and punitive.
Such preaching and visions of the “wrath of God” have
too often been wielded as weapons against the poor and vulnerable
to keep them in their place.
And yet . . . I have always wondered and thought about the biblical
assertion that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”
If you know anything about Luther’s explanations of the Ten
Commandments in his *Small Catechism*, you know that the explanation
of the First Commandment—to have no other gods—is this:
We are to fear, love, and trust God above all things.
And for each and every explanation of all the other commandments he
begins *we are to fear and love God so that we . . .*
What is Luther trying to say to Christians?
That all our speaking, acting, and our relationships receive their
direction by first our *fear and love of God*.
So now the question comes, are we, the 21st century church,
willing to “fear” God in ways that are right and necessary?
Do we recognize that when it comes to evil, injustice, and oppression,
God’s fierce love for what is good, is opposed to what is wrong
and so is, in fact, a “dread warrior?”
Are we willing, for example,
to allow this fiercely just and loving God
to shatter and reshape the systems that privilege the rich over the poor,
that perpetuates racist white supremacy against people of color?
Are we open to allowing God to do battle against
our thoughtless consumerism,
our casual lusts, our quiet hatreds,
our unexamined idolatries?

Are we willing to even try to fear, love and trust God above all things so that we are open to God breaking our hearts with compassion such that we stand in solidarity with the stranger, the refugee, the immigrant, the exile, the person of color?

Make no mistake, God's "peace" doesn't come at the expense of holiness, righteousness, mercy, and justice.

Some things must break, must shatter, must die, before the Word of God can take root and grow and manifest the reign of God in our lives and in our world.

Whether it is a besetting sin in my personal life or a corporate failure in my communal or national life, the question that matters is this:

Do I fear, love, and trust God to be a dread warrior, doing battle against the evil within and around me?

Do I fear, love, and trust God above all things so that God's word to me engages my life at its hardest, stoniest core?

Of . . . do I fear, love and trust another god . . . a soft substitute for God?

The psalmist states—

Zeal for your house has consumed me.

Well . . . has it?

This—is a question about love.

Zeal in the biblical context is fervor, ardor, passion.

So, I ask myself—

Do I feel ardent about God's house—that is, am I passionate about God's reputation?

Am I fervent and consumed by the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection that I feel pain when the good news is twisted, abused, maligned, or neglected?

Do I have a stake in God's house—God's family—God's people—God's world?

Well, I confess that the answer is sometimes no or certainly not enough. Let's face it—zeal makes most of us uncomfortable.

When it comes to religious devotion, we prefer a gentle reserve.
A polite detachment.
A measured interest.
A cool casualness.
But zeal?
Zeal is embarrassing.
Zeal is fanatical.
I don't know about you but most of my associations with the word zeal
bring up images of bible-thumping weirdos.

And yet the psalmist writes without apology that she is consumed with
passion for the things of God.
Jesus himself echoes this sentiment when he warns his disciples against
the dangers of a half-baked, tepid spirituality:
Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.

So what we should fear, these passages imply,
is *not* an ardent and intense devotion.
What we should fear is indifference.
Casualness.
A lukewarm faith that risks nothing and therefore gains nothing.
We are to fear, love, and trust God above all things . . .

Jesus tells us this morning—
Those who lose their life for my sake will find it.
This implies that God's timing will sometimes offend us.
God's measure of loss and gain
in a human life will sometimes appall us.
What I take Jesus to mean is that "losing our lives"
is part of the deal if we choose to follow him.
If we take our faith lives seriously,
we will pay a price before we reap a reward.
Which is to say,
we Christians need to be clear and honest about the faith we profess.

Yes, there is beauty, awe, healing, and laughter.
Yes, the very hairs on our head are all counted,
and, yes, we are worth more to God than many sparrows.
But the life of faith is also arduous.
The life of faith is also risky.
The life of faith does not
guarantee us health, wealth, prosperity, or safety.
The life of faith is sacrificial at its heart,
and to suggest otherwise is to lie.
For me to preach otherwise is to make a mockery of the gospel.

And so we come now to the “hard word” that Jesus speaks to us this day.
I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.
It’s very important that you hear me and understand that
when Jesus speaks here of division rather than peace,
he’s being descriptive—*not* prescriptive.
It is most definitely not Jesus’ desire or purpose
to set fathers against sons, or mothers against daughters.
It’s certainly not his will that we stir up conflict for conflict’s sake,
or use his words to justify violence or war.

Yet his words are a necessary reminder that the peace Jesus offers us is
not the fake peace of denial, dishonesty, and harmful accommodation.
As I have been reminding us over the past weeks,
The peace, the *shalom*, Jesus brings
is a holistic, truth-telling and disinfecting peace.
The kind of deep, life-changing peace that is not merely the absence of
conflict, but is willing to break in order to mend, to cut in order to heal.
The peace Jesus wants to create begins by putting first things first—
We are to fear, love, and trust God above all things.

Jesus always names realities we often don’t want named.
Jesus upsets hierarchies we would rather keep intact.
Jesus will expose the lies we tell ourselves and each other
out of cowardice, laziness, or obstinacy.

And, Jesus, will disrupt all dynamics in our relationships with ourselves and with each other that keep us from wholeness and holiness.

This is not because Jesus wants us to suffer.

It's because he knows that real peace is worth fighting for and he has promised he will always be righting for it right alongside us.

So, beloved of God, beloved body of Christ,
today Jesus is urging us to
fear, love and trust God above all things.