

What Are You Afraid Of?

Text: John 4:18; Luke 1:30

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Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
Advent IV, December 20, 1992

Transcription of the spoken sermon

There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. I John 4:18

Do not be afraid, Mary... Luke 1:30

In Advent, 1992, we're asking significant questions that have to do with our human existence and our relationship to God: Do you really think that he will come - this one who came? Will he come again? Do you expect that? Is there life after life? Hell? In these weeks, although we have answered those questions in less than traditional ways, we have affirmed again our Christian faith. We have affirmed that the God of our beginning is the God of our end, and the God of our meantime, that God is with us and that the last word is Grace. And if that is the case, then, "What Are You Afraid of?" What are the fears that dog your steps? What are the fears that haunt the inner sanctum of your heart? Fear, Henri Nouwen says, is so characteristic of our lives today that one could speak of our living in "a house of fear." Fears that are very personal. Fears that are connected with those we love. Fears connected with the situation of the world and the destiny of the cosmos. Category after category of fearful thoughts that often take possession of us. We live in "a house of fear." Nouwen, in his little book *Lifesigns*, invites us to move from "a house of fear" into a house of love - the house constituted by Jesus Christ, our Lord, the one who came at Christmas and whose Advent we celebrate again, and whose birth we will remember this week. To move from the house of fear to the house of love is the invitation of the Christmas Gospel.

Easier said than done perhaps, but let's for just a bit of time think about the perspective of the writer of this first letter of John, for he tells us that fear and love cannot coexist. Oh well, I suppose that's too strong a statement. As a matter of fact they do coexist in the hearts of us all. But to the extent that there is love, there will be an absence of fear. And to the extent that there is fear, there will be an absence of love.

If we did a little word association, if I gave you a word and you were to come up with the opposite... if I said, "high," I suppose you would say, "low." And if I said,

“black” you would say, “white.” If I said, “hot” you would say, “cold.” If I said, “love,” what would you say? Hate? I think there was a time when I would have said that hate is the opposite of love, but I don’t think so any more. I think, according to John in this letter, the opposite of love is fear. Perfect love, he says, “casts out fear.” Love and fear are at enmity with one another. It’s like light and darkness. To the extent that the light is there, the darkness is absent. To extent that it is dark, the light is absent. To the extent that the heart is filled with love, fear is absent. To the extent that fear controls the heart, love is absent. The opposite of love is fear. Fear is the root of all that destructive behavior, of evil and darkness. Destructive behavior, born of fear, impinges upon our selves and reaches out to all of those whose lives we touch. When we are afraid we are destructive. When we are afraid we cannot love, and we cannot live lovingly. So John in a very interesting association suggests that love casts out fear. He says, “God is love. And those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.” Love has been perfected among us in this that we may have boldness in the Day of Judgment, because as He is so are we in this world. There is no fear in love. Perfect love casts out fear.

In this Advent season when we have been talking about the last things - the last events - that final encounter - judgment - Hell? -I find it rather interesting that John associates love as the absence of fear, fear particularly related to the Day of Judgment. Now you say to me, “Well, fear of the day of judgment. There isn’t a lot of that around today. Most people have kicked that habit. We don’t have to fear eternal punishment or damnation or hell - we talked about that last week!” Most moderns, our neighbors, have put that idea to rest. It isn’t that terrifying threat that it once was, and yet John says that fear has to do with the experience of punishment and the fear of punishment. He says that love comes in in order that we might have confidence and boldness in the Day of Judgment. John seems to relate our present possibility of living in love without fear in relationship to the end event.

I just wonder - I wonder if he might be right. I wonder if there is something about us as human beings that would on a willed, conscious level rid ourselves of the idea of punishment and judgment, but that fear of it simply goes underground and in a kind of gorilla warfare disables us, so that much of our action that we would not directly relate to a fear of judgment and punishment is nonetheless precisely that. Whether consciously or unconsciously, we know that we are people who will be held accountable, that there will be a time of reckoning, that there will be that final encounter. Maybe down in the depths of our being we know that, so that it doesn’t matter to what extent we may pooh-pooh that final encounter, that day of judgment; nonetheless, there is something perhaps in the very fact that we are human that causes us consciously or unconsciously to feel a bit of disease and thus produce in us fear – fear, whose root we don’t understand, but whose consequences are felt in all of our relationships and all of our doings. Could that be? John says, “God is love. The one who abides in love, abides in God, and this love is what gives us confidence in the Day of Judgment because there is

no fear in love.” Hm-m-m. Rather interesting association of ideas isn’t it? I wonder if there could be something to that?

Harold Ellens, the psychiatrist, theologian and pastor, has spoken about the human condition as a condition of anxiety. I mentioned this a few weeks ago, I forget in what connection, but that human anxiety is not the consequence of our sin, it is the consequence of our being human. He speaks of a kind of generic anxiety which is the consequence of spending nine months all safe and secure in the darkness and warmth of the womb, only to come splashing and bouncing down the birth canal into the bright lights of the delivery room to respond to a whap on the bottom side with a wail! We come into this world wailing. Scared to death. Fragile. That’s anxiety producing. And then he goes to the Genesis stories and shows that even in that setting, the human couple there is anxious - there is an anxiety producing set of circumstances, so that to be human is to be anxious.

Then he goes on to say, and I think quite rightly, that the greatest anxiety reducing mechanism in the world is religion. Religion is a universal phenomenon. Stamp it out here and it will pop up there. You can’t seem to get rid of it. Any place you go in any age, any people, there is some kind of religious ritual, some form of religious practice. We who are simply a little farther along on the human story and a little more sophisticated in our religious experience, nonetheless, crave the basics - a kind of cultic practice. That is, a ritual. The prayers we offer. The gestures we make, and a certain mode or code of behavior that we follow, certain creeds that we assent to. They all constitute cult for worship. A creed to lead, a moral code to follow - those are the ingredients of religion, whatever the religion may be. And religion, by and large, is a universal phenomenon which has been a great anxiety reducing mechanism. It is how we anxious people try to come to terms with our anxiety. It is a way we come to curry favor with God, to appease God.

There is something endemic in us that knows that we write with crooked lines. And, accountable people that we are, because we are human, we feel a need for some kind of buffer against that final moment, that examination, that judgment day, when God might hold us accountable. So our life is fraught with anxiety. And Ellens says that we try to devise means by which we can buffer ourselves against that anxiety, a way by which we may find ourselves acceptable to that all examining eye of the Eternal God - and so we turn to religion.

That is the story of most religion. That is very much what most religion has been about. But the problem with most religion is that it becomes the tyranny of the should and the ought and the must. It becomes a prescription to follow. It becomes a matter of performance - of doing things, of gaining favor through ritual acts, creedal belief, and moral behavior. And any time you are in the business of gaining peace through performance you never make it. We can never satisfy the demands, the infinite demands. We will always fall short. We will always come up wanting. We will always be weighed in the balance and found

wanting and we know it. There is no peace! Rather, that anxiety reducing mechanism that we call religion becomes an exacerbation of the anxiety with which we came into this world, and our religion all too often binds us and makes us seven-fold more the child of hell than when we began. Religion is too often binding, controlling, coercive, manipulative. It is not too often good news, but bad news. And the threat of hell and of judgment, and of damnation and of condemnation broadly used in the religions of the world, do not reduce anxiety, but increase it. But, of course, the people cowering in fear are manageable at least.

John has quite a different thing to say. What he says isn't the Bible's only message, but if we could only hear this. Do you hear it with me? "God is love." He has said it before. He doesn't say "God loves," he said, "God is love." That is whatever God is, whatever God does, God does it in a loving fashion because God is love, and, "Those who abide in love, abide in God and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this that we may have boldness in the day of judgment." It would seem that what John is trying to say is that if you could get a glimpse of the love of God, if you could get a grasp of the love of God, then that intrinsic human guilt and cowering before that final moment of judgment would dissolve. Because John says that, "there is no fear in love. God is love." And, love has been perfected among us in this, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment because as he is so are we in the world."

As Christ is. How is Christ? Christ is one with God. Christ is in the presence of God - crucified, resurrected, received in the presence of God. "As he is so are we in this world." Earlier he has said, "Beloved, behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed upon us that we should be called the children of God, and such we are now. And it doth not yet appear what we shall be, but when He appears we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is. Beloved, what matter of love, we are now, children of God." If we could only believe it. If we could only lay hold of it. If we could only know that there is no record that stands against us. If we could only know that the love of God somehow or other has embraced us so that the record has been expunged and we are embraced in an everlasting love, so that there is no need for fear in judgment. I think that's what John is talking about. Do you sense that's about one hundred eighty degrees from where most religion would take you? From the place of the tyranny of the ought and the should and the must.

People have challenged me about my promiscuous offer of grace, about the prodigality of God's love, about the unconditional love of God that embraces us. Is that not dangerous? they ask. Will not people exploit that? Will not people take advantage of that? If that is true - if we are loved already, if we are embraced already, if judgment is passed already - then why worship? Then why live in praise and wonder?

Why? Precisely because of that! Precisely because of a love so amazing, so divine that it demands my life, my soul, my all! There is no fear in love. Most of the time the Church has not dared preach it. Too radical. The people cannot handle it. They will take advantage of it. Nonsense! Preach fear to the people and you bind them in fear. Preach fear and you increase resentment. Preach fear and you exacerbate anger - hostility. Dare to preach love - and you transform. God is love. And love is perfected in this - that we have boldness before the thought of judgment. There is no fear in love. Perfect love casts out fear. The one who fears is not perfected in love. Most of the time the Church would keep you afraid. It's safer that way - for the masses. Nonsense. Dear, serious, sincere, religious people have been forced to cower before the demands of an angry God rather than hearing the word of the Christmas Gospel. The covenant of grace instituted with Abraham began when God came to Abraham and said, "Do not be afraid." Old Zacharias was in the temple doing his thing and the angel came and said, "Do not be afraid." Mary, a young Hebrew maiden doing her cross-stitching was encountered by an angel who began, "Don't be afraid." And Joseph, concerned about this situation that confronted him, heard from the angel saying, "Fear not." The Christmas Gospel is Good News pure and simple. You don't have to be afraid. God is love. And love casts out fear and so that endemic human sense of accountability that causes you to cower has been dissolved by the chemistry of God's eternal love.

Preaching on this text one day, Martin Luther King Jr. spoke about the time of the Montgomery, Alabama bus protest. After one particularly horrendous week in which he had been arrested and he had received phone calls threatening his life, and everything seemed impossible, he had to speak to a mass rally. When he was done speaking he came down from the podium and old Mother Pollard came forward. She was an old, black woman, uneducated and wise, who marched and marched, and marched in many protests. She came up to him after he had finished speaking and said, "Son, come here." He went to her and gave her a hug and she said, "What's wrong with you tonight?" He said, "Nothing, I'm fine." She said, "You don't talk strong tonight. Something's wrong. Is it that we ain't followin' you enough? Or is it them white folk?" And then she looked at him and said, "Son, whether we follow you or not, God's gonna take care of you." And Martin Luther King said that from that day, because of the words of old Mother Pollard, he was able to live without fear. You say, "Well, that's just fine. He said it that way at 8:30 but if you remember he died by an assassin's bullet." He was killed after all. Yes, that's true. The Christmas Gospel does not say that life is not perilous, that human existence is not fragile, that there is not tragedy and suffering. Bullets cut us down. Cancer cuts us down. There is brokenness and pain enough to go around. But Martin Luther King lived the rest of his days without fear. That is to say, he *lived* until he died. But when fear enwraps our hearts we never live before we die.

We will all die one way or another. And we will meet the Lord face to face. The question is whether we will have truly lived before we die - lived without fear.

So what are you afraid of? What are you afraid of? Name it. Speak it before the face of God - and let it go. Just let it go.