

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

Rev. Tom Gehring

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May these words of my mouth and this meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

- “And they were afraid”
 - Today’s Gospel from Luke leaves us on a bit of an ominous foreboding note.
 - Which, admittedly is not out of place in a passage that tells the story of Jesus crossing the sea in Gentile land, and encountering a man afflicted by demons.
 - My partner and I have been watching the latest season of Stranger Things on Netflix, and honestly today’s bible passage would not be out of place as an episode within that series.
 - Yet, despite all the dramatic and immense elements of this particular passage from Luke, what I ended up being struck most by while reading and re-reading this story was the way the crowd reacts to seeing the unnamed man healed, and sitting at Jesus feet, assuming the position of a disciple.
 - “They were afraid”
- I can’t help but hear echoes of Mark’s gospel.
 - Whose original ending is a bit abrupt and unsettling.
 - For those who might now know, Mark’s gospel has 2 endings that scholars have derived by studying manuscripts.
 - One appears to be original to the rest of the text,
 - The other, added in at a later time and date.
 - The original ending has Mary Magdalene and the other women disciples encounter Jesus at the empty tomb after his resurrection.
 - And after seeing the resurrected Christ and hearing him say “go, tell Peter and the other disciples”

- And yet the final verse of the original ending says “and they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”
 - An abrupt and unsettling ending to a remarkable story indeed.
 - And it begs the question “if they said nothing, then how is the story being told?”
- But, of course, Mark’s gospel is not the only time that Fear shows up in the bible.
 - Anytime that an angel appears to a human, the very first thing the angel says is “do not be afraid”
 - It might seem odd at first, but given how the bible describes the appearance of angels, It is not surprising
 - Angels in the bible do not look like how Michaelangelo has painted them, as plump little winged babies.
 - They’re a mess of wings and far too many eyes, some of them having multiple animal heads. And usually, when they appear there is a flash of almost blinding light.
 - It makes perfect sense then, that the first thing that these angelic beings say to humanity is “do not be afraid.”
- And perhaps the most consequential instance of fear showing up in the bible is the fact that Jesus’ mere existence and the way he carried out his ministry, terrified those in power.
 - The news of his birth scared King Herod to the point that he ordered every young boy in the region to be murdered.
 - And as news of Jesus’ ministry and teachings spread, the empire and those in power were afraid to the point of killing him on a cross, a torture device used to keep the subjugated masses fearful of the might of Rome.
- It seems as though when God gets actively involved in human lives, more often than not, the response is to be afraid.
 - And, don’t get me wrong, fear is a valid feeling. There are things in this world and this life that we lead that simply are, scary.
- Indeed, fear is a powerful emotion and motivator. One that often leads to actions and judgments.

- Returning to today's gospel text, there are 2 instances of fear, one of which is obvious, and the other which is more implied through subtext.
 - There is the obvious fear of what Jesus did
 - This is what gets named at the end of the passage.
 - The people show up, and see the man clothed and in his right mind, no longer beset by demons, sitting at the foot of this foreign Jewish Rabbi, and they were afraid.
 - And, there is the implied fear of the community. The fear of that which is unknown and different, which resulted in the man living out in the tombs in the first place.
 - It is not stated explicitly, but I believe it to be obvious that this man did not choose a life of isolation.
 - He didn't wake up one day and say "my entire life goal is to live in the tombs outside the city."
 - No, it's implied that his demonic possession struck fear into the members of the community he dwelled among, and it is that fear that caused him to become an outcast.
 - Living in a place of impurity. Chained and shackled. Naked, tormented, and alone. With nothing but a herd of pigs as his company.
- Yet Jesus goes to him.
 - In an act of radical inclusion and love, Jesus meets this man where he is. The very things that had caused the community to be so afraid to the point of casting this man out into the tombs, are no issue to Jesus.
 - And this simple act of going to the outcast is enough to overcome "Legion" the name of the demon tormenting the man, as well as a literary reference to the Roman Military.
 - Jesus shows that through radical loving action, we are more powerful than the legions of Rome, and the fear that addles us.
- We hear in Jesus' actions, the echoes of Isaiah's prophecy.
 - In the Old Testament reading, we heard of a people who were worshiping in ungodly ways
 - In that context, the community was doing ritually impure things such as gathering in unclean spaces for worship, and eating and drinking things that were forbidden in the purity laws .

- There also seems to be an attitude of being “holier than thou” (verse 5) the passage
- In the context of Pentecost, unfaithfulness is less about breaking purity laws as it is not loving as we have been loved. As we are filled with the same Spirit of Christ.
- This causes some strong judgment from God, to the point of saying God will repay them with punishment
 - Yet promises to save a remnant.

In today’s context, there’s much to be afraid of.

- Socio political unrest to the point of extremist violence
- Loss of trust in the systems meant to govern and aid us, who are being revealed as perpetuating power
- Monumental floods, perennial forest fires, rising temperatures, oceans choked with plastic.
- Active campaigns against the dignity and freedom of all people
- The list of things that could cause us fear today seems to be never-ending.
 - If in response to all that is going in the world, you are feeling fear, I will be the first to tell that that is valid, and I would even say it is normal.
- And yet what we have to go on, is the example of Christ.
 - The same Christ who went to the source of people’s fear in love.
 - Who preached and taught a new life grounded in caring for and meeting the needs of those around you.
 - Acting out in radical love
 - Going to those who have been exiled, meeting their needs, and in doing so,
 - Wrestling power away from empire and bringing it back into beloved community
- My friends, We are called and set free to love. We are filled with the same Spirit as Christ that we might also follow the example of radical love. So let us all go forth, knowing that the Spirit sets us free.
 - be not afraid. Amen.