



First Sunday after Epiphany

THE BAPTISM OF OUR LORD

January 9, 2022

Prelude: "We Sing the Mighty Power of God"

arr: Hartsell

Gathering

WELCOME & LIGHTING THE CHRIST CANDLE

Acolyte: Jesus Christ is the light of the world. We light this candle as a sign that Christ has come and Christ will come again. As the light pushes back darkness let us walk with, learn from, and worship Jesus Christ.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Liturgist: Ascribe to the Lord, you heavenly beings, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.

All: Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness.

Psalms 29:1-2

Choir: "Ascribe to the Lord"

Powell

Ascribe to the Lord, O mighty ones, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name, in the splendor of His holiness,
worship Him! The voice of the Lord is over the waters, the God of glory thunders.
The voice of the Lord is powerful, the voice of the Lord is majestic!

Psalms 29:1-4

GOD'S GREETING

PASSING THE PEACE

All Singing: 575 "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty"

Reconciliation

Liturgist: The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah.

All: John answered, "I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

Luke 3:15-17

Silent Confession and Reflection

Choir: "This is My Beloved Son" Uhl

When John baptized the Christ, our Lord, the heavens opened wide.
The Spirit from on high came down, descending like a dove.
Assuring those on Jordan's banks a voice proclaimed these words:
This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased.
Come Holy Spirit heavenly dove. Come now in visitation.
Renew in us baptismal grace throughout each day, in every place,
You are the way, the truth, the light. Lead us to our salvation.

Liturgist: The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord thunders over the mighty waters.

All: The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is majestic.

Liturgist: The voice of the Lord twists the oaks and strips the forests bare,

All: And in his temple all cry, "Glory!" *Psalm 29:3, 4, 9*

All Singing: 10 "We Sing the Mighty Power of God"

Liturgist: Colossians 3:1-11

Proclamation

All Singing: 532 "Be Still for the Presence"

Scripture: Isaiah 43:1-7

Minister: The Word of the Lord.

All: Thanks be to God.

Sermon: Industries of Fear

All Singing: 430 "You Are Mine"
Singing verses 1, 2, and 4

Dedication

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

All Singing: 946 "Go, My Children, with My Blessing"

BENEDICTION

Minister: The Lord sits enthroned over the flood; the Lord is enthroned as king forever.
The Lord gives strength to his people; the Lord blesses his people with peace.
Psalm 29:10-11

Postlude: "Tollite Hostias" (Bring Forth Your Offerings) by Saint-Saenz

Worship Leaders

Organist / Pianist / Flutist: Lynn Hollender
Choir Director: David Baar
Choir Accompanist: Bev Baar
Minister: Roger Nelson

Acolyte: Moriah Dykstra
Liturgist: Patty DeJong
Prayer: Dick DeJong

Hymns are from *Lift Up Your Hearts* (Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2013)
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5825 W 151st Street, Oak Forest, IL 60452
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Text: Isaiah 43:1-7
Title: Industries of Fear
Date: 01.09.22
Roger Allen Nelson

Dear friends,

This is preeminently the time to speak the truth, the whole truth, frankly and boldly. Nor need we shrink from honestly facing conditions in our country today. This great nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and will prosper. So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoned, unjustified, terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.

With those words, Franklin Delano Roosevelt inaugurated his presidency in 1933. The United States was wedged between two world wars and mired in a deep trough of the Depression. National confidence was at low ebb, solutions were elusive, and recovery seemed like a mirage. The moment was precarious. The President-elect needed to chart a course for the country. And he began by talking about fear.

The rest of the speech had a solemn, religious quality. For example:

These dark days will be worth all they cost us if they teach us that our true destiny is not to be ministered unto but to minister to ourselves and to our fellow men.

FDR called for commitment, sacrifice, and seeking the common the good, but he began with fear.

The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.

Maybe FDR was on to something. There was reason to be afraid but people were paralyzed by fear and FDR knew that they needed to be encouraged and reassured. He knew that while fear can animate human activity the resolution of fear is essential to human flourishing.

Before coming to Hope if I'd been asked what themes would run through my preaching, I would have said something about Jesus, the brokenness of this world, the restoration of shalom, and a grace that extends beyond imagination and theological system. I don't think I would have said anything about fear. I didn't know what FDR knew.

But after almost 20 years, I'm struck by how often fear is a central thread in scripture. I don't willy-nilly pick passages for preaching, they're prescribed by the lectionary, but over and over again I've lifted up a thread about fear.

Consider this morning's text...

The people of Israel were battered by years of war, were the victims of ethnic cleansing, and were abandoned in a foreign land. Jerusalem was in ruins and the Israelites were singing songs of exile in Babylon. As strangers in a strange land, with the boot of the oppressor on their throats, they were mired in a deep trough of powerlessness. National confidence was at low ebb, solutions were elusive, and recovery seemed like a mirage. They were paralyzed with fear....

The text we read from Isaiah corresponds with that historical reality, it's from a section often called the Book of Consolation.

But now, this is what the Lord says – he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine.... Do not be afraid, for I am with you...”

Over and over, with every turn of the page, with every turn of events, God's response to the human experience:

Do not be afraid, for I am with you.

Thomas Long writes:

If you had to put the Gospel of Jesus Christ into one phrase, I think it might be, “Do not be afraid” It is what the angels said to the shepherds in Bethlehem when Jesus was born: “Do not be afraid.” It is the first word the angel spoke on Easter morning: “Do not be afraid.” It is what the risen Christ said to his disciples: “Do not be afraid. I am with you always.”

At birth, death, and resurrection: Do not be afraid.

Pastor/Author Rick Warren counts 365 variations of that command in scripture. That count seems a little too tidy....

But no matter how deep the water or how high the flame,
no matter how hard the road or how heavy the load,
no matter how long the journey or how dire the straights,
God says,

Do not be afraid, for I am with you.

However, what about when there's good reason to be afraid? Sunday school teacher and former President Jimmy Carter released an essay a few days ago with this line:

I now fear that what we have fought so hard to achieve globally — the right to free, fair elections, unhindered by strongman politicians who seek nothing more than to grow their own power — has become dangerously fragile at home.

If you pay attention to a particular strain of news, you'll fear that democracy is under siege and civil war is coming. If you swim in a different news-media-eco-system, you'll fear the loss of individual freedoms, hordes of lawless immigrants, critical race theory, Antifa, entitled welfare recipients, and jihadi terrorists....

We fear either the virus or the vaccines, the Proud Boys or Black Lives Matter. We fear socialism or insurrection, the corruption of voting integrity or the loss of voting rights. We fear censorship or unfettered lies. You get the idea....

I'm not arguing a moral equivalence between these two competing visions. I'm not suggesting equal footing regarding objective truth. But, no matter how or where we consume news, we participate in industries of fear. They stimulate and stoke our fears. They promote and profit from fear. We live in an age where anxiety has been commodified. We live in a culture of fear.

And, look, some fear is clearly situational. If you're being chased by a pit bull or you've eaten spoiled meat there's reason to anticipate discomfort and rightly be afraid. But human development theorists point toward fear as more than just a function of culture or situation. Fear is fundamental in the shaping of human personhood.

This will feel like Psychology 101...

Abraham Maslow suggested that we have a hierarchy of needs, and as the lower needs are filled the higher needs emerge. At the base of our pyramid is the need for food, water, air, sleep; but the very next fundamental need is for a sense of safety, security, and belonging. We can't move and grow unless there is resolution to fear.

Erik Erikson believes that we all pass through developmental stages and each stage is characterized by a different "crisis" which must be resolved so that we can move on to the next stage. If we resolve a particular stage in a broken or incomplete manner we will struggle and revisit that "crisis" later in life. The first stage and his last stage are fundamentally about trust and fear. A healthy baby won't fear life. A healthy adult won't fear death. And almost every stage in between has some vestige of the dynamic of trust and fear.

You get the point. We all fear. Fear is an essential part of being human. The issue, the question, the crux of it seems to be how we respond to fear, or how we live with fear.

And I don't mean the resolution of fear through safer neighborhoods, healthier diets, or a more robust democracy. But I mean the resolution of fear, or how we live with fear, as central to who we are. And that gets at our faith, or our sense of God....

Dear friends, if one thread in scripture is fear, the other thread is belonging. Over and over in scripture, at every turn of the page, at every turn of events, God seeks after a people to be his own. One can't lift up the thread of fear without finding it woven with the thread of identity and belonging.

Therefore, these few lines from Isaiah, locate Israel's response to fear in both creation and redemption. And I think it's worth noting that Isaiah is writing here to a people and not to the interior lives of individuals. This is meant for a collective, for a community, and Claus Westermann notes that at this point the Israelites were

a tiny miserable and insignificant band of uprooted and men and women standing on the margins of a hostile empire...

But to them the Lord says, I created and redeemed you. Therefore, don't fear for your mine. The One who made you and saved you will never leave or forsake you. Ultimately, therefore, there is nothing to fear.

God doesn't promise that we'll be protected from those things that rightly scare us. We'll still be overwhelmed by the waters, singed by the fire, and struggle on the journey. Being created and redeemed by God doesn't spare us from dying of cancer, getting hit by a car, or struggling with depression. But the word of God through Isaiah is that we don't face those realities alone. We belong to a God who will never abandon us. So, while perfect love might cast out all fear, the resolution of fear is primarily a function of identity.

*What is your only comfort in life and in death?
That I am not my own, but belong, body and soul....*

At birth, death, and resurrection, you belong to God.
At birth, death, and resurrection, don't be afraid.

Scott Hoezee puts it this way,

...trials come to us in life. They come to all of us. And there is no guarantee that 2022 might not deliver more of the same one way or another. We still live in the shadow of all that has happened the last couple of difficult years. We live in the shadow of all the dear folks who died in our various congregations this past year as well as in the shadow of all those who left our congregations in a huff over mask mandates or vaccines or some other pandemic-related and deeply politicized thing. And there will be more hurt in our congregations this year. There will be disappointment.

What we cling to in utter hope, however, is that God goes with us in and through all that. We will not be finally swept away or drowned or burned up. There will always be a new thing yet to come in God's grace and in his slow kingdom coming.

Amen.