

This morning I ask your indulgence as I wander away from the assigned texts a bit. What I really want to talk about today is fear. I am guessing it is a feeling with which you are well acquainted right now. In the last week we have witnessed a dramatic escalation in the reported number of cases of COVID 19, our economy is badly rattled and those of us privileged enough to have money in the stock market and retirement accounts have seen them evaporate. Our public health system has been noticeably slow off the mark, and the reaction of our government has been, not to put too fine a point on it, incompetent. So we are afraid. Afraid for ourselves. Afraid for those we love. Afraid for an about-to-be overwhelmed health care system. Afraid for our future. Afraid of all that we don't know at this point. And some of us are cranky- cranky about having to disrupt our lives and our routines. Events are being cancelled all around us-events we may have really looked forward to attending or have put a lot of effort into organizing. We can't even gather in person as the Church. Certain things are in short supply at the store as people panic buy. Anyone shopping after I have been to the store is going to be hard pressed to find dark chocolate...Life as we know it, at least for now, has changed. And so we are in uncharted territory and afraid.

The Bible is full of passages about fear. Angels are constantly popping up to tell everyone from Isaiah to Mary not to be afraid. Riiggght. As an angel comes at you with a flaming coal or pops up in your house announcing that you are about to get pregnant. Seriously? Don't be afraid? Jesus is constantly telling his followers, even when they are in the midst of some pretty terrifying things- like sitting in a tiny boat in the middle of the sea in a raging storm, not to be afraid. And you know what that tells us? It tells us everyone was afraid. That fear is part of being human. And, you will notice, the angels didn't say never mind and leave, Jesus didn't tell anyone to go away because they were afraid. Fear does not make us unfaithful, "bad" Christians- it just means we are human. Because while fear can be crippling, it can also be life giving. It warned our ancestors to steer clear of that sabre toothed tiger. It warns us to get out of dangerous situations. It is

our own built in warning system—a gift from God. So, no, I do not think it is wrong, or un-Godly to be afraid. I do not think it is evidence of a lack of faith. I think it is a normal human response to situations that could have negative consequences for us. I think the issue for the angels, for Jesus, for us, is what we do with that fear? How do we respond to our fears? We know from a neurological perspective, that fear/stress/trauma actually change how our brain functions. We get tunnel vision, become incapable of processing information the way we normally do. Our horizons narrow and we can become self focused. And we tend to lash out at others in ways we normally wouldn't, operating from our lizard brain. In other words it can bring out the worst in us. It can distort our relationships, separating us from each other.

St. Paul had a few things to say about this- about fear, about our relationships to each other, and about ultimate trust in God. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes of Christ as the head and all of us, every beloved child of God, as the body. He reminds us that we are, in essence, all part of the same whole. The eye can't say to the hand, "I don't need you" and the head cannot say to the foot "I don't need you". And of course, in any body, in addition to heads, feet, and eyes, there are hangnails and blisters. None of us likes to think of ourselves as such, but the fact is at times I am definitely the blister on the body of Christ, and you are the hangnail. And no matter what, we need each other and we have a responsibility to care for each other; hangnails, blisters, and all. No matter what we think, we cannot and never have lived in isolation, whether we can actually touch each other or not. We humans are hardwired for relationship- it was built into us in the beginning. Right now we are called to remember that, despite our fear, we are one body. We need each other and we are to have special care for the weak and the vulnerable.

Right now that includes avoiding public places so as not to transmit the virus to someone who is vulnerable and not overloading what will be an extraordinarily burdened health system. It means checking in with each

other- calling those who are lonely and housebound and finding other creative ways to stay in community with each other. The other day I saw a video of Italians coming out onto their balconies and singing together, albeit at a distance. Perhaps we need to do the same. Being one body means naming our fears and supporting each other through them. And we are starting to see this happen. People *are* doing random acts of kindness, *are* supporting each other.

So my dear siblings in Christ, I speak to you as one who is fully human and therefore is afraid. Afraid of this virus, afraid of what it might do to me and those I love, and afraid of all that I don't know. And yet I also speak to you as one who, deep in my bones, trusts in God. Not that God is going to magically protect me and those I love- but that, no matter what happens, God is in the midst of it. Being a follower of Jesus, being part of a Christian community, does not make us immune to fear and pain, but rather gives us a way through it, gives us others with whom we can lean into the painful, sometimes hurtful, often baffling reality of life.

Turning again to Paul, in his letter to the Romans he writes:

“What should be our response? Simply this; “If God is for us, who can be against us?” Since God did not spare the Only Begotten, but gave Christ up for the sake of us all, we may be certain, after such a gift, that God will freely give us everything. Who will bring a charge against God's chosen ones? Since God is the One who justifies, who has the power to condemn? Only Christ Jesus, who died-or rather, was raised, and sits at the right hand of God, and who now intercedes for us!

What will separate us from the love of Christ? Trouble? Calamity? Persecution? Hunger? Nakedness? Danger? Violence? No! In all this we are more than conquerors because of God who has loved us. For I am certain that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, neither heights nor depths-nor anything else in all

creation- will be able to separate us from the love of God that comes to us in Christ Jesus, our Savior.”

This is the truth that will sustain us now. This reminder that nothing, absolutely nothing, can separate us from the love of God. Not COVID 19, not quarantines, not fear- nothing. You see, we people of God, we were made exactly for times such as this. Times when all around us is fear and it seems to be gaining the upper hand. We are called to know, to trust, to proclaim, that no matter what the details, we will be and are held in God. In this season of Lent, our time in the wilderness of fear, we know that the wilderness, suffering, fear, and pain do not have the last word. They did not for Jesus. They will not for us. God, life, always has the last word.

Resurrection, new life in God has the last word. God has gone ahead of us into the dark, terrifying, and isolating places of life, and God is pushing us, pulling us, midwifing us, through all the fear filled tombs of our lives. So breathe, know you are not alone, and remember that all our hope is founded on God who created us, who loves us now, and who always will.