

Baptism of the Lord
January 13th, 2019
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Hudson Falls, NY

“Fear is the Mindkiller”

Text: Isaiah 43:1b-2: “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.

Scripture Lesson: Isaiah 43:1-7

Proposition: I propose to experientially show that God is always at our side, to the end that hearers will take courage that although they will face hardship, they can do so without fear.

Prayer for Illumination: God of glory and strength, as strong and majestic as your voice is, we ask for you to take a moment to ensure that our ears are ready to hear it and our minds are open to understand what you say. We pray this in your name. Amen.

Scriptural Context: These verses from Isaiah were likely written during the actual time of the Exile to Babylon from Judah. As the author preached to those who were strangers in a strange land, let us listen for God’s Word.

I must not fear.

Fear is the mind-killer.

Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration.

I will face my fear.

I will permit it to pass over me and through me.

And when it has gone past I will turn the inner eye to see its path.

Where the fear has gone there will be nothing.

Only I will remain.

That's called the "Litany Against Fear." It sounds like it could be from an ancient Buddhist text. Or maybe from the Bhagavad Gita. But it's from a science-fiction book: Frank Herbert's classic: *Dune*. I've talked about it before. It is used in the book by an order of women and their students in times of peril or crisis. And it stands out, at least to me, as one of those times when words from a work of fiction are as profound and meaningful as any nonfiction work. Fear is powerful. It can be dangerous. And it's an unavoidable, I think, piece of the human condition.

We have to acknowledge, of course, that not all fear is bad. Fear keeps us safe. It keeps us from driving too fast or leaping off buildings or encouraging our kids to be reckless. It keeps us operating inside the Law. We can sometimes harness fear and use it as a powerful motivator to get healthy, build our investments, work on salvaging our relationships. Fear is not always bad.

But neither will fear be contained if you just leave it to itself. Fear is greedy, and the second it gets a toe-hold, it will claw and scrape its way in little by little and try to set up shop. And when it does, it can be as relentless and deadly as any cancer.

Which of course is why terrorism is so effective. We've been talking about terrorism for so long now since 2001 that it's become synonymous with a couple of groups of extremists, when what it really is is a tactic of those groups. The tactic is to fill the hearts of one's enemies with fear. It's to

make it so that they say, “Am I next? Is my family next?” To make it so that they look at their neighbors with mistrust. To make it so that cohesive communities start to tear themselves apart. To make it so that people lash out and become reckless as they scramble to keep themselves safe. That’s terrorism. It’s not just about evil acts, it’s about spreading fear. And that fear runs deep in us these days.

And not just from terrorists. The gears of capitalism have been turning and ratcheting up so that news media – which began as a service – has become more and more about ratings and clicks and ad space. And what drives consumption of that media? Fear. And add to that all the worries and insecurities that we would be carrying about anyway from cultural baggage, from our own neuroses and from real danger that does exist, and we discover that we are every bit as captive to fear as the Israelites were to the Babylonians 2600 years ago.

That’s when our reading this morning was written. The book of Isaiah is divided by scholars into three sections. First Isaiah, up through chapter 39, is the words of the actual historical person named Isaiah, who preached around 700 bce, while the Assyrians were continuing the expansion of their empire into the areas surrounding Judah and Israel. That section also contains sermons written on those texts about 100 years later. A lot changed in that 100 years. Namely, Assyria collapsed into civil war and was replaced as the dominant power by the Babylonians. And it was they who destroyed Jerusalem and took the people into exile.

Third Isaiah begins in chapter 55 and goes through the end of the book. It's a collection of anonymous prophecies written after the people returned from exile. And then Second Isaiah covers chapters 40-54, which is where our reading comes from, and was written during the time of the exile. The people who heard the words that we read had parents who were killed in the siege. They had memories of going to the Temple when they were kids and they had memories of seeing it in smoldering, smoking ruins behind them as they walked east in chains to Babylon. They had seen their people murdered with their own eyes. They had seen and felt the merciless brutality of their captors. And they were slaves and strangers in a strange land with no end in sight to their misery. And this prophet said to them, "Do not fear."

It's easy for those words to sound hollow. They'd heard them before, people had been saying them forever for all kinds of reasons. "Do not fear" and then the Babylonians were on the horizon. "Do not fear" and then the siege started. "Do not fear" and then they broke through the walls. "Do not fear" and then the Temple - God's very house and home - was destroyed. What does it say about your god if God's home is destroyed and there are no consequences for the destroyers? "Do not fear" and the executions started. "Do not fear" and here they were, slaves in a foreign land.

Their fears had all come true. What good had trying not be afraid, done them? And what good did it do them now? It didn't undo the terrible

past, and who was to say that the worst was over? Yet those words hung in the air all the same: “do not fear.”

By themselves, they’re not helpful, I think. They don’t change reality. And the reality is that fear is very powerful and in almost limitless supply. We have been captives to fear most of our lives. There have certainly been moments of freedom, but we keep going back – choosing to be with our captor. A captor that keeps us in prison so that we won’t feel the love and hope and promise around us. We have denied ourselves love because Fear told us to. It told us that we weren’t worthy, that we weren’t special, that love wasn’t safe, that we needed to do more to earn love.

We’ve denied ourselves happiness because Fear told us we didn’t deserve it. We’ve denied ourselves agency and control because Fear told us that we were too weak. We’ve denied ourselves hope because Fear told us that hope is cheap and no matter how hard we work, bad things can happen to anyone. We’ve denied ourselves growth as human beings, because Fear told us to. Fear said to us that we were slaves and not in control. But fear is a liar. And it’s the most dangerous kind of liar because its lies contain kernels of truth and then twist them to its own devices.¹

There is darkness and danger and pain and evil in the world. Those things exist and they can do us tremendous harm. But that fact does not

¹ “A Servant of Fear,” Aubrey Marcus, *Aubrey Marcus Newsletter*, December 12, 2018.

negate the other fact, which is that there is also light and safety and joy and love in the world, and those things are within our reach at all times. They are gifts which means that there's nothing to earn, nothing to be worthy of, nothing we have to become in order to get them. They are gifts from a loving God to a broken and fearful people.

“Do not fear” God says through the prophet, but it doesn't end there. It goes on to say that when you pass through the waters, God will be with you; when you pass through the rivers they will not wash away; when you walk through the fire, you will not be burned and set ablaze. *That* is where there is promise. That is where there is a hope that is not cheap. Because God doesn't say “Don't fear, nothing bad will happen.” Bad things will happen. Floods will come into your life. Fires will rage around you. It is inescapable. But because God is with you, those things will not destroy you. And I'm not saying that bad things will never kill you, because that can happen too. But killing a person and destroying a person's very soul are not the same thing. And because God is with us, our souls can withstand anything.

And that promise to the exiles was true. Their captivity ended. They were freed from bondage. They returned to their homeland and rebuilt what had been destroyed. They grew again into the people God had dreamed they would be.

“Do not fear,” God says, “for I have redeemed you” (43:1). I have redeemed you. I have paid the ransom for you. I have paid the price to buy you back from fear. Fear is not your master anymore. Fear is not your prison anymore. For the Lord your God has paid the price and called you by name, and is bringing your children from the east and gathering you from the west, and calling you from the north and summoning you from the south. Your captivity is over. The destruction and desolation are past.

Remember that and breathe deep and feel God’s freedom in your lungs. Shake off those chains and rejoice in how good your ankles and wrists feel without those heavy shackles on them. Stretch your legs, stretch your back, reach to the sky, feel the earth; feel the warmth on your skin. This is what freedom feels like. The bad old days are gone, and today is Day One of your freedom. **Amen.**