

December 8, 2019

Second Sunday of Advent

OLD SOUTH CHURCH IN BOSTON

Fear. Revere. a sermon by Nancy S. Taylor, Senior Minister,

Based on Luke 1.46-55 (The *Magnificat*)

This Advent season we are preaching into a hard theme: “A Christian Response to a Season of Strife”. Here is how we are describing it: “War. Grief. Anxiety. Death. Open the paper or tune into the news and you will see more fear and foreboding than merry and bright.”

I conducted some research into this, asking various people: What do you most fear? It is an invasive question, a hard one to ask; a painful question to answer. Here is what I heard:

I heard that you parents, above all else, fear the death of your child or children. I heard that the childless and pet-blessed, fear the death of your beloved, furry friend. You fear your own death and dying. You, some of you, the older ones among us, fear the loss of mobility, the loss of your faculties. You fear becoming irrelevant, old, unnecessary. You fear loneliness. You fear, by turns a violent intruder, a devastating diagnosis, car crash, plane crash, house fire, the possibility that your spouse or partner will find another person more appealing than they now find you. You fear failure, failing an important test or exam, failing parenting. You fear being found out, running out of money.

When I asked persons of color the same question, What do *you* most fear? they named all of the above and then added more: Racial profiling. Unequal treatment in the courts, by the police, by employers, by teachers. Micro aggressions. Unconscious racism.

When I asked some unhoused persons the same question, What do *you* most fear? they named all of the above and added these: frostbite, theft, being beaten up, ridicule, not finding a safe place to sleep.

People in other parts of the world, or other parts of this country, or other parts of this city might add yet more: detainment without benefit of law or lawyers, gun violence, food insecurity, lack of health care, warfare, infant mortality, epidemic, natural disaster, terrorism, statelessness (being a refugee).

There’s a lot to be afraid of and a lot to be afraid for. And you, what do you most fear?

Biblically speaking, the first words angels blurt out upon meeting mortals is: *Be not afraid!* Maybe it’s because mortals find angels frightening, but maybe it is because angels know mortals to be in a near constant state of fear.

The Bible, while recognizing these very real, very earthly fears, counsels against allowing them to gain spiritual control over our lives. The Bible – and God, and Jesus – recognize that worldly fear can predominate, causing paralysis and undermining our capacity to live well, to live deeply, expansively, authentically.

I am a fan of the Harry Potter books and enamored of the class sessions on boggarts. A boggart is a shape-shifting non-being that takes on the form of its observer's worst fear. If you are terrified of spiders (as is Ron Weasley), the Boggart takes the form of the largest, most hideous spider you can imagine. If you are terrified by the thought of your loved one experiencing a violent death (as is Misses Weasley), the boggart takes the form of your loved one as a bloody corpse.

One of the strengths of the Harry Potter books, is how these young adventurers – these wizards and muggles – are forced to name, to reveal to their classmates and teachers, and to face down their fears.

My guess is most of us don't name our fears very often, don't reveal this part of our lives to others. We stuff our fears down, trying to keep the fear-genie in the bottle, the lid tightly screwed on.

I wonder if you are thinking now, about what it is *you* most fear?

Our God knows us to be a fearful lot, shrinking and quivering in the face of those terrors of the night by which – most of us, at some time or other – are stalked.

While we don't have access to the magic of Harry Potter – we are without wands and spells – we have something better.

Mary sings of this something better in her song, the *Magnificat*. Mary, who is in all probability a young teenager at the time she learns she is with child, gathers her courage, faces her fears and sings out to God. She places herself in God's hands. She reminds us, in her song of the source of her courage: "God's mercy" she sings, "is for those who fear God, from generation to generation."

God and Jesus ache for us to trade one kind of fear (the kinds I have listed) with another kind of fear: the fear of God. There was a time when committed Christians were known as God-fearing people. To be called a God-fearer was a badge of honor. However, the idea and the practice of fearing God has gone quite out of favor. It's time to bring it back. It is a vital theological concept.

Let me explain. To be God-fearing does not mean fearing God the way you fear a terrible diagnosis or the death of a loved one. Nor is it the fear of getting into trouble. It is no servile fear. Rather it is a joyful awareness of God's grandeur (Pope Francis). It is to feel profound reverence in the awesome presence of God. It is to feel awe, trembling awe, reverential astonishment in the face of that which is high and holy, mighty and mysterious.

It is to know, Rudolph Otto's *mysterium tremendum*, (the awful mystery that repels) in the presence of the dreadful, fearful, and overwhelming aspect of the numinous. At the same time, it is to know, viscerally know, the *mysterium fascinosum* (the mystery that attracts), by which humans are irresistibly drawn to the glory, beauty, and splendor of God.

Another way of putting it: it is to be filled with a sovereign respect for God; a respect so profound that it makes us dread, above all things, offending God. (Catholic Encyclopedia, Jacques Forget)

Do you, for example, dread offending God by failing to take up the cause of the suffering poor? You should. Do you, for example, dread offending God by failing to forgive your enemy? You should. Do you, for example, dread offending God by possessing a hard heart? You should.

How many of you have read, CS Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*? In the book, Aslan, the great Lion is the representation of Christ. Here is a brief passage from the book:

"Aslan is a lion. The Lion. The Great Lion!"

"Ooh, said Susan. I'd thought he was a man. Is he...quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.

Mrs Beaver replies to Susan: "That you will, dearie, and make no mistake, if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most, or else just silly.

"Then, he isn't safe?" asks Lucy

"Safe?" roars Mr. Beaver. "Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the king, I tell you."

The one who fears God knows that God isn't safe. But knows, too, that God is good.

Hear me church: God is not safe. God is wild, untamed, raw, mighty, and resplendent. God is awesome, overwhelming, breathtaking.

It is well to fear and revere God as one fears and reveres an awesome teacher, a parent or grandparent, or a fierce ocean storm.

The biblical book of Proverbs has something to say about this. I'll bet you know this proverb. Finish it for me: "The fear of God is the beginning of _____." (Proverbs 1.7)

The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. But, how so? Here's how: In the sense that in the face and presence of God's immortality we know our limited mortality.

The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. How so? Here's how: In the face of God's wisdom, we are humbled by the breadth and depth of our ignorance.

The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. How so? Here's how: In the presence of God's unbearable perfection, our sinfulness floods and shames us.

The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. How so? Here's how: In the presence of the grand, generous sweep of God's divine forgiveness, our petty slights, our little jealousies, the grudges we nurse, these appear teensy, trifling, mean and paltry...and so do they make us.

This is the kind of fear wrought in stained glass, to my left, high above the parable windows. Note the seven angels surrounding the central dove of the Holy Spirit. The seven angels represent the virtues: wisdom, pity, strength, counsel, understanding, cunning, and, at eleven o'clock, fear. The fear up there, high and lifted up, is not fear of disease or death. Rather, it is the awful, awesome fear of God.

It is the kind of fear that you might feel in the presence of the great prophets in those windows to the back – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel and Ezekiel – prophets who evoke the wild, untamed grandeur of God; who evoke God's inescapable scrutiny; prophets who are as dreadful as they are fascinating, whose righteousness is uncompromising, raw, and fearsome.

May I suggest that in your Advent pilgrimage – in this season of fear and anxiety –you take to heart Mary's great song; that you, like that teenaged girl of so long ago, undertake to trade one kind of fear, earthly fear, for another, for fear of God, reverence for God, for the God who cared enough to send to earth God's own son.

Here is why: Forgiveness was born on Christmas Day. Death defeated on Easter morn.

Surely these should quell our fears and free us to live expansively, deeply, authentically.

May you love God so much
that you love nothing else too much.
And may you fear and revere God enough,
that you need fear nothing else at all.