

Sermon	January 9, 2022	Epiphany +1	Fr. Nick Smith
Isaiah 43:1-7	Psalms 29	Acts 8:14-17	Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen.

Thus says the Lord, he who created you: Do not fear. So begins our lesson this morning from the Prophet Isaiah. Do not fear. Fear not. Do not let your hearts be troubled. Be not afraid. This one command in particular echoes throughout our scriptures: in the Hebrew writings and prophecies, in the New Testament Epistles; in the Psalms, for sure. And certainly in the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, who, it turns out, is God's own Son. So, he should know. Speaking through the angel host, God tells the shepherds at Bethlehem 'Fear not'. Speaking through the Angel Gabriel, God tells Mary 'Fear not'. Jesus teaches; 'But even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not therefore: you are of more value than many sparrows.' And 'Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.' Literally hundreds of times the Bible makes the proclamation, the claim, that we should not permit fear to overwhelm us, that fear is but a distraction from the reassurance, the significance, the wisdom God prefers we celebrate.

Now, I am not going to be so out-of-touch as to preach against all fear; that would be a fool's errand. Fear is, no doubt, a necessary component in our psychology, probably even a gift from God to all living creatures as a survival instinct. If any creature, even you or I, were totally without a fear reflex, we might endanger ourselves constantly by recklessness and endanger others by ignorant irresponsibility. But surely there is also the danger of becoming obsessed with a survival instinct: obsessed with hunger, with distrust, with selfishness, and likewise with fear. A danger in exaggerating dangerousness, of fearing fear itself. And such obsessiveness, God knows, can easily restrict our courage, diminish our usefulness, detract from our mission, and even sometimes leave us languishing fearfully in a fog, hopeless and useless. And, I must admit, I have been a bit impatient with the culture of fear this pandemic has caused. Impatient, by the way, not only with others, but with myself. Times of danger do indeed require caution, but living for long periods of time in desperate fear is unhealthy. It can be a pandemic all its own. It can suppress our usefulness, damage our relationships, and raise our blood pressure. It can go viral.

Fear not, says God. Psalm 29 says, the voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness, makes the trees writhe, strips the forests bare, metaphorically. The voice of the Lord splits the flames of fire which threaten us, and the Lord sits enthroned above and beyond the dangerous floods of everyday life, even when they are lapping at our feet. The Lord has command over all danger, and, dear friends, the opposite of fear is faith. The antidote to obsessive, unnecessary fear is faith. The source of bravery is faith. Faith is not recklessness or lack of reasonable caution, but it is the living spring from which we draw the refreshment of courage and valor. And in the temple of the Lord, all are crying "Glory!", not "Oh, Snap!" Our Holy Scriptures insist that the Lord sits enthroned for evermore. There is no limit of time or even social distance to the Lord's powerful influence. God makes us, God loves us, and God keeps us for evermore. God shares with us both the Son's unconditional love and the Spirit's bottomless inspiration, neither of which BTW is served by a culture of fear. Faith is found in building new relationships, in receiving and accepting new blessings and opportunities and realities. Faith is the reassurance that God's dream is freedom from obsessive fear.

In this lesson from Isaiah, from chapter 43, are perhaps the most compelling 3 words of Holy Scripture: "You are mine." Think about that for a moment: thus says the Lord, you are mine. That phrase, that quote from God, is so intimate! You are mine. Have you heard God say that to you? Underneath all the noise and clamor of the world, have you heard God say that to you? Do not fear, for I have redeemed you, restored your worthiness, and I have called you by name. You are mine. No matter what, you are mine. When you pass through the stormy waters, I will be with you. You are mine. When you walk through flames which threaten the foundation of the world, you shall not be burned. You are mine. Do not fear. You have not been abandoned, you have not been orphaned, you are not alone, and you are not hopeless, for you are mine. This enlightening revelation is at the core of the season of Epiphany; It speaks to all questions of creation, sin, judgment, and redemption. It places us squarely in the midst of God's eternal dream. No pandemic or other fearful nonsense will separate us from that dream. You are mine, says the Lord.

The season of Epiphany always begins with a reading about Jesus' baptism. Now, the baptism which John offered at the Jordan River may have begun as a typical ritual cleansing, a washing away of sin, but it soon evolved into much more. When Jesus came up out of the water and prayed, we are told, he heard God's voice proclaiming that he was God's Son. As the Messiah, of course, this had particular meaning to him. But, that same voice can remind us that we all are God's children. Today, our baptismal liturgy intentionally offers each child, each person, the experience of hearing God's voice calling them by name. Perhaps for the first time. And that voice is saying, "You are mine". Do not ever fear, for I have made you, and have made you worthy. I have called you by name. You are mine forever. When the world around seduces you into recklessness, which it probably will, I will redeem you and restore your worthiness. When the world around disregards and disrespects you, which it probably will, I will support you. When the world around seems fearful and scary, which it probably will, I will strengthen your resolve and encourage you. For I am calling you by name, and you are mine, says the Lord.

Dear friends, listen for that reassuring voice with the ears of your hearts. It may come to you in a visionary dream. It may come to you in conversation with a familiar friend. It may come to you in the text of a hymn or song or poem. That voice may come to you here during our common prayers. It may come through scripture as our lectors read aloud to you. It may even come wordless, but yet clear. Listen with the ears of your heart for that voice to call you by name, for the Lord's voice to claim you as God's own. And then be prepared for mysterious, unexpected, and miraculous epiphanies of your own. Do not fear, but rather have faith.

We in this congregation are called to be a community of faith, not a community of fear. We have been gathered, not to be reckless, but to bravely pursue the cause of love. God would not, I doubt, endorse foolish disregard of reality, but does, I believe, call us to be courageous in wisdom. The wise cause of love ought not to be interrupted by scary times or unpredictable prospects. Given the situation, under the circumstances, we still ought to do our best. And God will faithfully be with us, and will gather us one way or another to build the kingdom. "Do not fear", says the Lord in today's Psalm, "for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; I will say to the north, 'Give them up,' and to the south, 'Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth--everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.'" They are all mine. Amen