

Pentecost 25C Proper 28 sermon 111410
Isaiah 65:17-25; Canticle 9
2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19

In the name of the God of all hope, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

In a blog post by a Canadian physician named Diane Kelsall, I read this:

Fear is part of many people's lives. Fears can be very personal — fear of becoming ill, fear of unemployment, fear of cancer, fear of disability, fear of loneliness, fear of death. Fears can be societal. Fears of global warming, destruction of the environment, terrorism, or war are increasingly prevalent in our society. Most of these fears are not new (she says) — they have been around a long time — but an atmosphere of fear is pervasive.

Fear sells books. Fear sells movies. Fear sells newspapers and magazines.

... Fear. Fear. Fear.¹

There is a lot of fear in the world today. There is a lot of fear in America; in Texas; in Silsbee; and at St. John's. And there are times and situations in which fear is the only correct reaction to have. The fight/flight response that is innate in all of us is an appropriate reaction to some of the very real fears that face us from time-to-time. But what if fear becomes so pervasive that it pulls us into depression, or even paralyzes us?

I believe in my heart of hearts that modern American society's deepest desire is to have all of its citizenry completely controlled by fear. Look at any news outlet – network television, cable television, print, radio, or on-line – and you will see story after story, each of which is designed to illicit fear in its audience. Every day we hear that we should

¹ Kelsall, Diane, MD MEd CCFP FCFP, Editor – Changing Fear, Can Fam Physician. 2007 May; 53(5): 791. PMID: PMC1949149; © the College of Family Physicians of Canada, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1949149/>

be afraid: of our food supply – because it will poison us; of staying in a hotel or going to the movies – because we will be attacked by bedbugs; of any number of things happening in our country – because we might lose either our money or our freedom. And we should be very afraid of anyone who looks, talks, or acts differently from us – because “those people” all want us dead. Be afraid. Be very afraid.

This morning’s Old Testament reading from Isaiah, Cantic 9 (which also comes from Isaiah), and the Gospel reading from Luke chapter 21 are all versions of apocalyptic literature. Apocalyptic writing is not something that we see much of in modern society. And I believe that the fact that we don’t see much of it is one of the major reasons that people are so successful in sowing fear in our midst.

Sociologists have said that modern America subscribes to a theory of moral progressive developmentalism; what one theologian has described as “a conviction of moral progress, social improvement, the ‘power of positive thinking,’ church growth, and the psychotherapeutic gospel²,” all of which are supposedly controlled and determined by our own knowledge, skill and ability. When we look around and say to ourselves that everything that happens and all that will happen in the future are determined by the skill and ability we bring to the situation – that is a recipe for deep, paralyzing fear. If you and I are responsible for the progress, safety and well-being of the world in the days and

² The Rev. Dr. William H. Willimon, <http://www3.logosproductions.com>, November 14, 2010

years to come, my brothers and sisters in Christ, this world is in bad shape indeed. And we *should* be afraid.

Apocalyptic literature on the other hand, shows an eternally hopeful view of the world – a view that is decidedly subscribed to by our Lord, Jesus Christ. When we see the word “apocalyptic” we think “end of the world.” But in actual fact, the word simply means to reveal or show something – as in, revealing a vision of the future. That’s what Apocalypticism is all about – giving us a vision of *God’s future*. And as we learn from the Book of Revelation (also known as the Apocalypse of St. John), in the end – no matter what else happens – God wins. That is the real point of apocalyptic literature. The future is always in God’s hands and always comes down to that one thing – God wins.

God told the prophet Isaiah, “I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.” Now that can be either very comforting or very fear-inducing, depending upon your vision of who God is – and what it is that God wants for creation in general, and us in particular. Throughout the Old Testament, the people had a vision of a vengeful and angry God who demanded perfect obedience and required sacrifices in order to atone for misdoings. With that vision of God in mind, it is no wonder that the people of Jesus’ day were fearful of the future. But we know better ... or at least we *should* know better.

In the incarnation – through the person of Jesus – we came to know God in a very different and very personal way. Jesus showed us the absolute, unyielding love of the Father for all of creation, including the Father’s beloved children ... us. So when Jesus tells His Disciples that Jerusalem and its magnificent Temple will be destroyed, but that before that happens some of them will be persecuted and killed; they heard those dire predictions through the ears of people who knew that God would be with them through every bad time. And we should look at the future the same way Jesus’ first disciples did.

Canticle 9, the First Song of Isaiah, tell us, “Surely, it is God who saves me; I will trust in him and not be afraid. For the Lord is my stronghold and my sure defense, and he will be my Savior.” In other words, no matter how bad things may get around me; no matter how hopeless my life may look in the short term; I know the end of the story – God wins. And that means that I can trust in God and not be afraid, because with God as my sure defense, I can live through whatever comes ... and be stronger for the experience.

The Rev. Howard Hageman, pastor in the Reformed Church and former dean of that denomination’s seminary once wrote,

It is possible even in the contradictions and confusions of this life to keep the center of your being calm and undisturbed. It is possible even in this life to go through one hellish situation after another with strength and confidence of spirit. It is possible to endure physical pain and suffering while the mind and heart are filled with peace and joy. That’s what I mean by being in

paradise even while you are still part of this earthly scene of chance and change³.

There is no need to fear. God will deliver creation and make all things new. In the meantime we are called to do what is right in the eyes of God and to live in hope. As the author of the 1st letter of Peter said,

Do not fear what [those who don't believe in Christ] fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. ... For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil. For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God⁴.

Our modern society, which seems completely focused on fear, shows no signs of changing. As long as bad news sells more commercials than good news; as long as advertisers can sell more products to fearful people; as long as politicians can control voters by scaring them, fear will rule the airwaves. But Christians do not have to buy into the culture of fear. In fact, doing so goes against everything Jesus taught.

Jesus never promised that bad things would not happen to His followers. In fact, He said that they would. But He told us that if we trust fully and completely in God, we will have a better and more peaceful life in the midst of problems. And He assured us that in the end, God wins. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

³ Hageman, Howard – as printed in Synthesis Year C, Proper 28 November 14, 2010.

⁴ 1 Peter 3:14-16a, 17-18a