

“The Other Pandemic”

John 16:1-15

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In my first pastorate, I had a member of my church whose face and especially her mouth grew increasingly contorted, so MUCH so that it was almost impossible to understand her when she spoke at times. I asked her husband what had happened to her- was she born with a disfigurement? Had she been struck in the face by someone or something somewhere in the past that caused it to get all twisted up? He said, “Oh NO, Dave, it’s all from fear- she’s afraid of EVERYTHING even though it’s completely imagined, every bit of it is in her head. Oh, she’ll leave the house to go to church on Sundays, but then the rest of the week she’s afraid to leave it. She wasn’t that way when we first got married but one day she suddenly developed a twitch in her mouth and it deteriorated from there; she’s never been the same since. The doctors say it’s not physiological but PSYCHOLOGICAL and I’ve tried to get her to see a therapist but she refuses to go. As a result, I’ve just had to learn to live with it.” Both she and her husband were long-time members of the church and among the nicest people you would ever meet. She’d frequently call me up, telling me she was especially anxious that day and asked if I would pray with her. I always did, but whenever I asked her what it was she WAS afraid of, her reply was always the same- she just didn’t know.

Now to the present. Every week, I can expect to receive a phone call from George, the brother of my oldest friend who passed away several years back. He first began calling me shortly after the initial outbreak of the coronavirus and they’ve never stopped coming. Each time, he speaks in an almost state of panic, and it’s always about the same thing- his fears. At first it was fear over the pandemic and he would want me to pray that he didn’t catch it, as though my words had a secret power that his own prayers didn’t. And my advice was always the same: “George, of course we can all use prayer but if you’re careful and observe the recommended protocols, like most people, the odds are that you’ll be ok!” Still, despite my continuing assurance, I knew George would be calling again the following week asking for the same thing- and he always DID, without fail. At present, his calls concern his ongoing health problems- he’s much too overweight and can no longer get around without the aid of a walker. Last month he was hospitalized with a heart ailment and after a couple of weeks, he was transferred to a rehab in order to regain some strength in his legs and become ambulatory again. George tells me he is a Christian, and yet regardless of any advice I might give him, it seems to make absolutely no difference; it was as though he was incapable of hearing anything I say. I have now found myself often refusing to answer the phone when I know it is him calling, but then I eventually call him back because I know how much just hearing my voice is reassuring to him.

These are just two instances that demonstrate the power that anxiety and fear can have over people’s lives. For the past two years, this pandemic has inflicted its OWN form of terror- it has upended our daily lives, paralyzed our economy, and divided us from one another.

We saw our borders being closed, much air travel cut back, and restaurants remain virtually empty. I can't remember a time when our nation and the world felt so fearful and chaotic. Just in the past two years, it's been estimated that half of all Americans have contracted some form of the virus resulting in at least 900,000 fatalities- well over twice the number of Americans killed during World War II. Thankfully, with the aid of vaccines and health protocols, we're finally emerging from it but it remains a concern all the same as variants of the disease remain a constant threat. Of course, it is important to maintain a HEALTHY fear but if we give it an an UNDUE place in our lives, it can eventually paralyze us and even DESTROY us.

Honestly, I can't think of anything MORE DESTRUCTIVE to our faith than fear. In the Bible, "fear" is spoken of over 500 times with the repeated command to "Fear not!" or "Be not afraid" occurring some 103 times. Lloyd Ogilvie, the popular Presbyterian preacher and one-time Chaplain to the U.S. Senate, writes in *Facing the Future without Fear* that there are 366 "Fear nots" in the Bible, one for every day of the year, including Leap Year! He says that God doesn't want us to go a single day without hearing his word of comfort. In other words, for all the stress and anxiety people feel, God DOES provide an antidote this morning.

Our New Testament text is part of Jesus's Farewell Discourse, that is, his final instructions to his disciples in the Upper Room in the hours just prior to his betrayal and arrest. We are now at the end of our Lord's ministry. They've just concluded their final meal together--the Last Supper--and Jesus seems desperately trying to remind them of certain lessons he had taught them during the previous three and a half years. He has so much more to tell his followers and even what he HAS shared, they've been slow to grasp. He tells them, "I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear."

Well Jesus HAS to discuss such issues with his disciples and he's grown exasperated at THEIR reluctance to hear what it is he has to say. He wants them to understand that as conditions over the next few hours and days deteriorate and events begin to spin out of control, they are not to lose hope. Although he will be gone from them, he promises it will only be but for a brief time. What they DON'T realize is that in a few short hours, their leader would be arrested, tried, condemned, and executed. But rather than meaning the END of their ministry together, it would signify a WHOLE NEW BEGINNING as he would return to them in the form of the Holy Spirit, GOD'S Spirit. As a result, they would experience Jesus in an even MORE intimate manner than they had during the more than three years they had walked and talked and lived beside him. Afterwards, they could be assured he would never leave them again- EVER! His Spirit--the Comforter--would not only bring an end to their sorrow, he would empower and guide them in many NEW ways and lead them to accomplish far greater works than HE ever did. The problem is that they are so shocked and overcome by fear with the announcement that their leader would soon have to leave them that they cannot hear the REST of his message- they seem like my old friend George- COMPLETELY DEAF to what he has to tell them!

I'm reminded of an old TV life insurance commercial that began with the husband wanting to make some financial planning in the event either he or the wife were to suddenly die. The wife will have nothing to do with it and refuses to even DISCUSS the matter. "NO, Jim," she screams. "I just don't want to talk about it anymore!" And it ends with the exasperated

husband throwing up his hands in frustration. It was quite a popular and effective ad precisely BECAUSE it tapped into the viewers' OWN fears regarding end of life issues. It's hard to confront people with matters of death and dying because we're not only obliged to confront the possibility of one day losing someone we love, but it forces us to consider our OWN mortality, and that's a pretty painful thing to do.

That same commercial actually played out in my family some years ago. In 1975, I was attending college in California and thus unable to be home for the Easter holidays with the rest of my family who were in New Jersey. My sister Diana and her family were there with my parents and she related to me how after their Easter dinner, she was sitting alone with our father in the TV room. It was then he began to share some deep concerns he had. He said, "Diana, I'm trying to get my affairs in order in the event something was to ever happen to me. I just can't talk to your mother though. Every time I try to raise the issue with her, she either changes the subject or refuses to discuss it with me." It seemed that for months, my father was growing weaker while my mother kept insisting to everyone just how wonderful he looked. And then my father said to my sister, "Promise me that if anything ever happens to me, you'll look after the boys" (referring to me and my twin brother Howard who were twelve years younger than her). "Of course, dad," she said. "You won't ever have to worry about that." He must have had a premonition because less than four days later, a blood vessel burst in his throat and he hemorrhaged to death on a hospital gurney.

In v. 4 of our New Testament text, Jesus says he had not told them about the Spirit earlier because he was still with them, that as long as he was PHYSICALLY present, it was not necessary for them to receive the Spirit. As he will now be leaving them, it was important for them to know they would not be abandoned and left without a shepherd. Rather, he would STILL be present to them, but in SPIRIT form rather than in body.

In v. 5, Jesus makes a rather unusual remark. He says, "But now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you ASKS me, "Where are you going?" What makes this comment so strange is that twice earlier in this same discourse, they HAD asked him where he was going- once by Peter and another time by Thomas. In fact, throughout John's gospel, his disciples have been FULL of questions- constantly inquiring who Jesus is, what his ministry is about, and where it is he is taking them. After all, they wanted to be sure that all the sacrifices they'd made in leaving their families and abandoning their former occupations would not have been in vain. Yet, at the very moment he is informing them that he has to leave them, not ONE of his disciples even inquires where it is their Lord is going.

Jesus says, "Because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts." It finally hits them that Jesus is SERIOUS when he says he is about to leave them and, like the wife in that life insurance commercial, they are suddenly thrown into deep dejection. To think that he would not be with them any longer was not just intolerable to them, it was UNTHINKABLE!

Well what this exchange between Jesus and his disciples highlights is the extent that fear and sorrow can affect us in times of crisis and conflict. It's nearly impossible to hear ANY word of hope when one is so self-absorbed or overly preoccupied with oneself. Notice that as the reality of the moment begins to sink in, the disciples are not so much concerned about JESUS

and what it is HE may be going through as they are about THEMSELVES. After all, Jesus was human and he had to have had fears and worries every bit as real and as deep as THEIRS were. And yet, all they can think about was their OWN situation, of what might happen to THEM in the event Jesus HAD to go away. Their attitude was “Woe is me!” and NOT “Jesus, is there any way we can help YOU or support YOU as you’ve been there FOR US these past few years?”

Of course, SOME fear and sorrow is not only NATURAL, it is actually quite NECESSARY to our lives. Fear is a vital response to emotional or physical danger which if we DIDN’T have, we couldn’t protect ourselves against legitimate threats. It serves as a safety mechanism to prevent us from taking unnecessary or reckless risks that could hurt and even destroy us. However, psychologists tell us there is a danger to EXCESSIVE fear or sorrow and that is that it drives us deep into ourselves, to the extent that it causes us to care only about OURSELVES and to forget about all others. Thus there is something inherently selfish about it. The great Reformers like Luther and Calvin frequently referred to sin as “curvitas en se” or a “curving in upon oneself.” It was an excessive preoccupation with the self and one’s own situation to the exclusion of everyone else- the COMPLETE OPPOSITE of love.

John in his gospel shows us a series of instances where the sorrow and fear of his followers were SO overwhelming that it distorted their perception of reality and blinded them as to the possibilities of new life offered by Christ. For instance, after Lazarus dies in chapter 11, Jesus goes to Bethany to console Mary and Martha, his sisters. Mary is SO overcome with grief that she can’t even leave her house while Martha is unable to grasp Christ’s promise that her brother would rise again. Jesus basically says to her, “Martha, don’t you understand- I am the resurrection and the life. Wherever I am, there is always the possibility of new life and just to prove it, I will now raise up your brother.” However, because both sisters are so bound up in sorrow, so “curved in upon themselves” in their grief, they are unable to take Jesus at his word and thus experience the NEW hope, the NEW joy, and thus the NEW LIFE he promises. In another scene, when Mary Magdalene arrives at the tomb of Christ on Easter morning to anoint his body, she discovers the stone removed and his body gone. Consumed with grief, she can’t even recognize the presence of Jesus before her, MISTAKING him for the local gardener.

A third occurrence takes place on the evening of Jesus’ resurrection. In the wake of their leader’s execution, the disciples have retreated to the Upper Room where we are told the doors and windows were shut for fear of the Jews. They feared that with their leader now gone, they were NEXT to be hunted down and arrested. The significance of the doors and windows being shut is that it transforms their meeting place into a prison cell that does far more than keep the Jews OUT- it locks them all IN. They no longer remembered what Jesus had told them three days earlier, that they were to remain strong, faith-filled, and to not give in to despair for though he would be GONE, it would be just for a SHORT TIME. He’d be returning to them in the form of God’s Spirit and afterwards, they’d never again be separated. However, having FORGOTTEN those words, the faith and hope and joy which once characterized their mission have completely vanished as they have now become prisoners to their own fears, their own despair, and to their own bitter disappointments.

But then, just when their fear is at its highest and their faith is at its depths, it says that

Jesus suddenly appears in their midst with the words, “Peace be with you,” or to state it another way, “Do not fear!” Right at the point of their DEEPEST NEED, Christ appears to show them that there isn’t a locked door or barred window ANYWHERE that can possibly keep him out. By materializing before them in all his risen glory, those locked doors and windows are suddenly flung wide open to allow the fresh winds of faith and hope and joy and love to once again fill their lives and revive their hopes of ministry with their Lord. The journey which Jesus had begun with them three and half years earlier was NOT over but could begin AGAIN!

In all three instances, we see how grief and fear are devastating emotional states that drive us deep within ourselves and cut us off from healthy interaction with God and others. They blind us to the possibilities of faith and hope and joy and love- even when they are right BEFORE us. More than anything, we NEED our friends, we NEED our family, we NEED our church, but MOST of all we need CHRIST HIMSELF to help pull us out of ourselves, out of that self-protective cocoon we wrap ourselves in which hinders us from becoming healthy, vibrant people again.

In this morning’s text, we see how Jesus’ response to his disciples was to REMIND them that they would NEVER be abandoned, NEVER be left alone, but that through every step of the ordeal that lay before them and beyond, he would STILL be there to guide them, to empower them, and to protect them. Making their heart his NEW home, he would help pull them out of themselves and back into the world where THEIR presence and ministry would be desperately needed. However, if he didn’t go away, they would never receive him; and if they did not receive him, they would never know this wonderful new intimacy with him and all the security that goes with it. The promise of his own abiding presence and the hope that comes with it will carry them through every situation, ESPECIALLY that which still lay before them.

Friends, as Christ sought to impress certain truths upon his disciples in that Upper Room so many years ago, so does he wish to impress upon US in the year 2022 those very SAME truths. Just as he exhorted his followers to remain strong, to remain faith-filled, and to NEVER succumb to cynicism or surrender to despair, he asks US to do the SAME this morning. Only, the key to remaining faithful is by first REMEMBERING and not FORGETTING- remembering Jesus’s words of promise; remembering how he is WITH us and FOR us REGARDLESS how difficult times may get; remembering how nothing, no NOTHING will EVER separate us from either his presence or his love. This morning, he says to us, “Time is short and, yes, life IS hard but take heart in that I have OVERCOME the world! Do not worry and never lose hope. As difficult as your circumstances may be, please believe that I am above and below, around and even WITHIN you this very moment. You can never escape my presence nor the love that binds me to you. I am the Comforter and I will not only dry your tears and relieve your sorrow, I will empower and guide you in many new and exciting ways- only do not despair! Do NOT let fear and sorrow dominate your heart- they are a cancer that can make you selfish and miserable and blind to the condition and needs of others. They can make a prison house of your soul, allowing little room for faith or love or joy in it. Permit my Spirit to take up residency in YOUR spirit and let me make your heart my new home. My presence within you will then become a PROMISE that will carry you through the darkest of times and a HOPE that will raise you to new and glorious heights- of THAT, you can be sure.” Let us pray...

*Dear Lord, amid all the turbulence and fear of this present day, help us to appreciate your Son, Jesus Christ, and his Spirit which makes our heart his home. May our trust and reliance on you become SO total that we would never capitulate to excessive fear or worry or sorrow or despair. The promise of your presence in us is the ONLY thing that can draw us out of ourselves and back into the world where you would have us serve. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.*