

Second Sunday after the Epiphany

January 16, 2022

The Reverend Dr. Brent Was

“Your love, O LORD, reaches to the heavens, \* and your faithfulness to the clouds.”

Good morning everyone. Let's settling in for a moment. We're going to be on Zoom for a couple more weeks. Look around. Look at each other. This is one of the things I appreciated about our long stretch of Zoom time in 2020-21: seeing each other's homes, seeing you all and your pets in your natural environments, seeing each others' faces, not just backs of heads except for a flash at the peace. It is a relief having some company at home; it's a nice break having some church friends over, especially since you don't have to clean the bathroom before we arrive.

Last week we spoke about the Holy Spirit, Her descent upon Jesus at His Baptism, Her wild and unpredictable nature and how Truth and Goodness and Beauty, as opposed to our own personal preferences, can be revealed when we follow the Spirit... and how scary that can be. How actually listening to and following the Holy Spirit can lead us to places we can't imagine going, or maybe places we want to go, but fear, convention, habit hold us back. Mostly fear, I believe. So much of our COVID/political/climatic/economic upheaval is defined by fear.

I don't want to let go of the Wedding feast in Cana. This is one of the peak revelations of divine love to the world. The first of the great signs that Jesus Himself did. (Pop Quiz: what were the other two Epiphanies)? But the Cana story is a story about a wedding. And besides the occasional nightmarish divorced parents situation or a bonified bride-zilla (I've only dealt with one of those), weddings are usually happy places. Ideal places. That is why Jesus speaks of weddings so often when describing the Commonwealth of God. There is nothing more natural or joyous than people celebrating the joining of two lives, two bodies, two presents and futures together.

Of course there are a bazillion happy places across the globe right now, I pray some of them are in your lives, there certainly are, and the headlines continue to be pretty grim. The statistics, too. So this morning we're stepping away from the lectionary to follow up on last week's sermon, delving a little deeper into our fear, and bringing to bear one of our nations heroes whose life and martyrdom we celebrate this weekend, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr..

As I was reading for this morning, I came across one of his sermons that begins like this: “In these days of catastrophic change and calamitous uncertainty, is there anyone who does not experience the depression and bewilderment of crippling fear, which, like a nagging hound of hell, pursues our every footstep?” Sound apropos to this very moment? I thought so.

Dr. King opens his sermon “Antidotes for fear” by discussing the nature of fear, reminding us that fear is natural and is essential. It warns us of approaching danger. It motivates us to plan ahead. “The fear of darkness led to the discovery of the secret of electricity. The fear of pain led to the marvelous advances of medical science.” But some fears are abnormal, distorted. Sigmund Freud had a patient who was properly afraid of snakes in the

heart of an African jungle. He had another who neurotically feared snakes under the carpet of their urban apartment. Psychologists, says King, say that normal children are born with only two fears – falling and loud noises – and all other things are environmentally acquired. Most of these fears are snakes under the carpet. But some of them are not.

Dr. King's first prescription is that "we must unflinchingly face our fears and honestly ask ourselves why we are afraid. This confrontation will, to some measure, grant us power. We shall never be cured of fear by escapism or repression, for the more we attempt to ignore and repress our fears, the more we multiply our inner conflicts."

There is power in that. Shining light into our inner depths. The 4<sup>th</sup> step of AA is to make a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves. What if we made a searching and fearless inventory of the places that scare us? How revealing could that be? We must face our fear, examine it, understand it.

"Second," Dr. King writes, "we can master fear through one of the supreme virtues known to man: courage. Plato considered courage to be an element of the soul which bridges the cleavage between reason and desire. Aristotle thought of courage as the affirmation of man's essential nature. Thomas Aquinas said that courage is the strength of mind capable of conquering whatever threatens the attainment of the highest good."

"Courage," he writes, "is the power of the mind to overcome fear... Courage, the determination not to be overwhelmed by any object, however frightful, enables us to stand up to any fear." Because some things we fear are snakes under the carpet. But some things are not. Dr King knew about things to be scared of. Some things do attempt to negate our lives, and must be met with courage, "which is the power of life to affirm itself in spite of life's ambiguities." And this, he notes in a typical poetic brilliance, "requires the exercise of a creative will that enables us to hew out a stone of hope from a mountain of despair." I want some of that. You? We must master our fear with courage.

Third, fear is mastered through love. This is really the heart of not so much this sermon, but the life, ministry and legacy of Martin Luther King. The text he preached on here was from the 1<sup>st</sup> letter of John, (Chapter 4, verse 18 if you are interested). "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love." This is the kind of love that can confront evil "without flinching and shows in our popular parlance an infinite capacity to 'take it.'" This is the love that led Jesus to the Cross and "kept Paul unembittered amid the angry torrents of persecution..." "Hate is rooted in fear, and the only cure for fear-hate is love."

The good pastor brings love to bear on two primary sources of fear he identifies: war and the shadow of nuclear annihilation, a key theme of his particularly as his ministry matured, and racial injustice. Though the specter of nuclear war isn't as pronounced nowadays, we continue to spend more on defense than all other discretionary spending combined, more than the next 11 nations in the world combined. It is fear that leads us to make that decision every year federal budget time comes along, to spend three quarters of a trillion dollars on war. Every year. People hailed the \$1 trillion infrastructure bill as a once in a generation happening. We spend \$750 billion EVERY

YEAR on defense. (And the tab didn't go down even though we lost Afghanistan). But armament expenditure doesn't cast out fear, "Love, understanding, and organized good will" does.

Love is also the antidote for the irrational fears of segregation, "fears as the loss of preferred economic privilege, altered social status, intermarriage, and adjustment to new situations.... (but) neither repression, massive resistance, nor aggressive violence will cast out the fear of integration; only love and goodwill can do that." A lot of those same themes persist for a lot of folks in this nation, the fear of change, the fear of the white majority becoming the minority in by 2050.

Here King takes us down the path that eventually led to the whole Truth and Reconciliation movement inspired by the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Central to that is the idea that not only must white folks depend on their commitment to Christian love, but black folks, too. "*The Negro must convince the white man that he seeks justice for both himself and the white man. A mass movement exercising love and nonviolence and demonstrating power under discipline should convince the white community that were such a movement to attain full strength its power would be used creatively and not vengefully.*"

But love can be brought to bear not only on the great issues of the day, but in our own personal lives, our own private anxieties. "Envy, jealousy, a lack of self-confidence, a feeling of insecurity, and a haunting sense of inferiority are all rooted in fear. We do not envy people and then fear them; first we fear them and subsequently we become jealous of them." But following the feminist wisdom that the personal is political, King offers the same loving guidance to all of our fears: "Hatred and bitterness can never cure the disease of fear; only love can do that. Hatred paralyzes life; love releases it. Hatred confuses life; love harmonizes it. Hatred darkens life; love illumines it." We can conquer fear with love.

Fourth (and finally), Dr. King tells us that fear is mastered through faith. He starts with a brief story. "All too many people attempt to face the tensions of life with inadequate spiritual resources. When vacationing in Mexico, Mrs. King and I wished to go deep-sea fishing. For reasons of economy, we rented an old and poorly equipped boat. We gave this little thought until, ten miles from shore, the clouds lowered and howling winds blew. Then we became paralyzed with fear, for we knew our boat was deficient. Multitudes of people are in a similar situation. Heavy winds and weak boats explain their fear."

What he is getting at is that "...the fear of death, nonbeing, and nothingness, expressed in existential anxiety, may be cured only by a positive religious faith. A positive religious faith does not offer an illusion that we shall be exempt from pain and suffering, nor does it imbue us with the idea that life is a drama of unalloyed comfort and untroubled ease. Rather it instills us with the inner equilibrium need to face strains, burdens, and fears the inevitably come, and assures us that the universe is trustworthy and that God is concerned."

He really gets going here... "Religion endows us with the conviction that we are not alone in this vast, uncertain universe. Beneath and above the shifting sands of time, the uncertainties that darken our days, and the vicissitudes that cloud our nights is a wise and loving God. This universe is not a tragic expression of meaningless chaos but a marvelous display of orderly cosmos – 'the Lord by wisdom hath founded the earth; by understanding

hat he established the heavens.’ Mas is not a wisp of smoke from a limitless smoldering, but a child created ‘a little lower than the angels.’ Above the manyness of time stands the one eternal God, with wisdom to guide us, strength to protect us, and love to keep us. His boundless love supports and contains us as amightly ocean contains and supports the tiny drops of every wave. With a surging fullness he is forever moving towards us, seeking to fill the little creeks and bays of our lives with unlimited resources. This is religions everlasting diapason, it eternsl answer to the enigma of existence. Any man who finds this cosmic sustenance can walk the highways of life with our the fatigue of pessimism and the weight of morbid fears.”

He continues right to the heart of it, our fear of death... “Herein lies the answer to the neurotic fer of death tat plagues so many of our lives. Let us face the fear that the atomic bomb has aroused with the faith that we can never travel beyond the arms of the divine. Death is inevitable. It is a democracy for all of the people. Not an aristocracy for some of the people – kings die and beggars die; young men die and old men die; learned men die and ignorant men die. We need to fear it. The God who brought our whirling planet from primal vapor and had led the human pilgrimage for lo these many centuries can most assuredly lead us through deaths dark night into the bright daybreak of eternal life.” Preach it!

And fear creeps in despite all that faith. Dr. King tells a story about one of the key players int eh Montgomery bus protest, Mother Pollard. She is the one who, when asked if she were tired said, “My feets is tired, but my soul is rested.”

One night, after a hard week of an arrest and numerous death threats, Dr. King addressed the church, but Mother Pollard noticed that he wasn’t himself. “You didn’t talk strong tonight,” she told him. As preachers are want to do, he tried to push aside her concern for him. “Now you can’t fool me, she said. She continued, quoting the sermon, “I don told you we was with you all the way.’ Then her face became radiant and she said in words of quiet certainty, “But even if we ain’t with you, God’s gonna take care of you.”

That line, “God’s gonna take care of you,” kept coming back to King, transforming “a whirlwind of despair into a warm and reviving breeze of hope.”

Fear is a fact of life. Thanks be to God we have resources and teachers to help us navigate our lives. Facing our own fears. Bringing courage to bear. Mastering our fear with Love, mastering our fear with faith... we are not alone. Hope is not to be abandoned. Let’s end with a poem that brings some of this together.

## **Imaginary Conversation**

by Linda Pastan

You tell me to live each day  
as if it were my last. This is in the kitchen  
where before coffee I complain  
of the day ahead—that obstacle race  
of minutes and hours,

grocery stores and doctors.

But why the last? I ask. Why not  
live each day as if it were the first—  
all raw astonishment, Eve rubbing  
her eyes awake that first morning,  
the sun coming up  
like an ingénue in the east?

You grind the coffee  
with the small roar of a mind  
trying to clear itself. I set  
the table, glance out the window  
where dew has baptized every  
living surface.

AMEN