

Homily – Letting Go of Fear

Rob Keim

January 2, 2022 – St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church

Twenty-four years ago, seventeen of us from my work group at Hewlett-Packard went on an outing together. We went skydiving. It was not an officially sanctioned outing, so maybe that is how we got away with it. In groups of five we went up in an airplane and jumped out. I can assure you that after having done this once, I will never do it again. That moment of pure terror when I was standing with my feet at the edge was something I hope never to experience again. I don't know about you, but I try to avoid moments of pure terror. I try to avoid being overwhelmed by the things in life that could lead to injury or death. I may have moments when I seek excitement, but danger is something I avoid.

So, I can't imagine having a cruel king trying to kill my newborn child, but that is the story we have in today's Gospel reading. After being warned, Joseph took Mary and Jesus and fled from the land that had been their home for generations. While it is not said in today's reading, you should understand that King Herod had been given his kingdom by the occupying Roman forces. Herod lived in fear of an uprising that would topple his family from the throne, and there were stories that a baby had been born who would lead that uprising. You may have noticed from the bulletin that today's Gospel reading skips some verses. Here is some of what we skipped. "When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men." Historians disagree about whether this slaughter of babies actually happened, but the fear of this slaughter is what led Joseph, Mary, and Jesus to flee. Fear is what led them all the way to Egypt to get away from King Herod.

Our story doesn't tell us about how they found refuge. We don't know how they lived in Egypt. Because of their language and culture, I imagine Joseph, Mary and Jesus lived around other Jews in the land of Egypt. Tradition, says that Joseph was a carpenter, so he was a skilled laborer. He had a way to earn a living, but still being a refugee from violence is a difficult life. The trauma of the violence would have stayed with Joseph and Mary. Being a stranger in Egypt would have its own fears, but while Herod was still alive going back to Judea would have been unthinkable. Two thousand years ago when Jesus was born into the world, there were a lot of things to fear. And, if God came into this world as a baby, why do we still have so much fear today? You and I may not live in fear for our lives, but we are often stressed, feel overwhelmed, worry, and just dread the future. How can we let go of our fears and live into a world of love? In my own life, I have noticed that in the shower, or when I am peeling vegetables for dinner, at times when my mind is empty, it starts to

wander. And, it often wanders to negative places in which I relive something bad that has happened. Why do I go to the negative place? Today, let us understand fear by first understanding our propensity to be negative.

Now, negativity works in many immediate and seemingly good ways. It unites a fear-based group far more quickly than love does, especially if you do not recognize or admit your own fears. In addition, fear unites the separate parts of your own False Self. Our egos move forward by contraction, self-protection, and refusal. Our egos always move quickly to saying "no." It is sad to say, but contraction gives us focus, purpose, direction, superiority, and a strange kind of security. Contraction takes your aimless anxiety, covers it up, and turns it into purposefulness and urgency, which shows itself in a kind of drivenness. But this drive is not peaceful or happy. It is filled with agenda and sees all of its problems as "out there," never "in here." We find it easy and safe to point to those people and those situations over there. They are the problem.

However, our True Self does not proceed by contraction but by expansion. It moves forward, not by exclusion, but by inclusion. Our True Self sees things deeply and broadly, not by saying no, but by saying yes, at least on some level, to whatever comes our way. Remember in the readings from two weeks ago, when the Angel came to Mary, and Mary embraced her call. Mary's kind of yes does not come easily. It requires that you let down some of your ego boundaries, and none of us likes to do that. What I mean by Mary's kind of yes is a calm, wonderful ability to trust that someone else is in charge, and the foundations are good and going somewhere. It is a yes that is pure in motivation, open-ended in intent, and calm in confidence. Only grace can achieve such freedom in the soul, heart, or mind. We hardly know how to think this way by ourselves, but we can fall into the arms of the Holy Spirit.

Two thousand years ago, Jesus came to reveal and resolve the central and essential problem--humanity's tendency toward fear and negativity. The pattern is so deep and habitual within humans that we even make religion itself into a clever cover for our disguised need to remain fearful and negative. The ultimate disguise whereby you can remain a mean-spirited person is to do it for God or country. You are relieved of all inner anxiety; you can maintain your positive self-image and even some kind of moral high ground, while hidden underneath are "the bones of the dead and every kind of corruption."

On the other hand, love is the totally enlightened, entirely nonsensical way out of this pattern. Love has to be worked toward, received, and enjoyed, first of all by recognizing our deep capacity for fear and hate. But remember, we gather around the negative space quickly, while we "fall into" love rather slowly, and only with lots of practice at falling. Maybe 2022 is going to be a year that you fall in love, perhaps in

the romantic way, but maybe, even more importantly, in the Christ way. Fall in love with all of creation. Fall in love with all people. Fall in love with the Christ that is in all and around all. Fall in love with yourself. And fall in love with God who is always present. Bidden or unbidden God is present with each and every one of us.

This past week, I was reading an article in Popular Mechanics about falling six-miles and surviving. Here is a summary of the guidance. When you fall from an airplane flying at 35,000 feet you will probably lose consciousness briefly due to lack of oxygen. When you come round, spread your arms and legs to increase air resistance, and pray there is something yielding on or close to the ground. Yielding things including haystacks and bushes have cushioned free-fallers. Trees tend to skewer them. Snow works well, and swamps are even better. Though the odds are long, the article claims that a small number of people have found themselves falling without a parachute from 35,000 feet and living to tell another tale.

So what do you believe, surviving a six mile fall, or that love is stronger than fear? Or, maybe you believe both.