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Be Afraid? Or Don't Be Afraid?

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20

Luke 12:32-40

Introduction to Isaiah: The first word that the prophet Isaiah speaks to the people of Judah is a word of judgment and pending destruction. He uses the strongest language possible, calling them "rulers of Sodom" and "people of Gomorrah." Those two cities had become a byword for wickedness and were remembered because God completely destroyed the cities. When Scripture defines or identifies the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah, Scripture says that the people were proud, had excess food and ease but did not aid the poor and needy. They were proud and attacked rather than welcomed the stranger. (Ezekiel 16:49+) Contrary to some modern readings, the reason God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah did not have to do with homosexuality – that's not what Scripture remembers. Here, Isaiah says that Judah is going to be destroyed – like Sodom and Gomorrah – because they are disobedient to God in their everyday lives while at the same time continuing to worship and to bring their offerings – appearing to be faithful on the outside while ignoring the true meaning of worshiping God – to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan and plead for the widow. This is a difficult word to hear. Hear now as the Word of God judges, warns and excoriates those who come to worship.

Introduction to Luke: Seemingly opposite of our Old Testament text, the words from Jesus are comforting. "Do not be afraid, little flock" is where Jesus begins. The context of these words is the parable of the rich fool that we read last week (Luke 12:13-21), in which Jesus urges his followers to be "rich toward God." Then, Jesus speaks words that may be familiar to many of us. "Do not worry." Don't keep working for what you are to eat, drink and wear. God knows that we need these things. Instead, seek/work for/strive for God's kingdom and all of this will be given to us as well. Then, Jesus says this.

So – Are we to be afraid, be very afraid? Or, are we NOT to be afraid? Which is it?

I don't know about you, but I've been much more acquainted with "be very afraid" lately. I will admit to you that sometimes on Sunday mornings, I pick up the paper and open it with fear and trepidation. I have spent hours trying to listen to Scripture and discern what it is saying to us, but I never know anymore if some horrible event will have happened overnight that might make it very hard for us to listen to whatever the Scripture is for the day. I will admit to you

that I often feel unable to respond immediately to the terrible things that get reported in the news. I know what I think, but I don't want to confuse my opinion with God's word. So, I tend to stick with what I have written rather than trying to speak the "word of the Lord" on the fly. It is easy to be angry and afraid at what has been happening in our country. I don't want to preach "angry and afraid." I want to do the best job I can do – poor as it may be – to pay attention to God's word. My experience is that – even if I can't put words to the week's mass shooting or international threat of war – Scripture has a way of pointing me to the core of truth.

So, this week, as we struggled to make sense of mass shootings – plural – and as we read in the paper of economic trade wars and of financial experts trying to predict our future economics, and of scientists who are predicting catastrophic global consequences of the warming of our planet, we resonate with "Be afraid, be very afraid" more than we can claim Jesus' words, "Do not be afraid, little flock." We read Isaiah and we are afraid that we may be more faithful in our worship attendance than we are in learning to do good, to seek justice, to rescue the oppressed, to defend the orphan and to plead for the widow. Be very afraid seems to make more sense.

So, where is God in all of this? Should we be afraid or not afraid? Is God undecided or capricious or unpredictable. What should we expect from God's hand? It appears that God has a split personality. Is God about judgment and destruction, or about provision and comfort and grace?

Well, if Scripture is to be believed (and I believe it is the very Word of God), then it is not God's nature that is inconsistent, split or uncertain. The uncertainty and inconsistency is in us. And whether we should be very afraid or not afraid – scripture says – depends on whether or not we have decided that the One God – the Ruler of the Universe – who is all powerful and infinite – cares about us and wants us to love God – or not. The apparent inconsistency or conflict that these two passages of Scripture give us today is not in God. The root of the fear, conflict and resulting terror is in us.

I have recently read a collection of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr's sermons in a book called Strength To Love.ⁱ I recommend it highly! And in his sermon, "Antidotes for Fear," Dr. King makes a helpful distinction. He said that our goal is not to "eliminate fear altogether from human life. Were this humanly possible, it would be practically undesirable." (p. 120) Dr. King rightly acknowledges that there are good and normal fears and abnormal fears. He quotes Sigmund Freud who spoke of being rightly afraid of snakes in the heart of the jungle, but of the abnormal fear of being neurotically afraid of snakes under the carpet of our city apartment. Fear can be good and creative. Or fear can be neurotic, crippling and paralyzing. How are we to know the difference and what are we to do?

The only way to know the difference between appropriate fear and neurotic, abnormal fear is to know the truth. There really are snakes in the jungle that can kill us. There really are not snakes under the carpets in our homes.

And the truth that Scripture offers us over and over – every single time we read it – is that there really is a God who created and rules the universe in absolute power and goodness and who created all that is. This God has reached out to God’s creation and invited us to be in relationship – to know, love and serve the God who is infinite. This God is a good and loving being [Westminster catechism definition of God????]. And the truth is that our lives and the fortunes of our nations are determined in large part by whether we acknowledge this Infinite and eternal God and respond to the invitation to know, love and serve that God or not. That is what God was up to when God created Adam and Eve. That is what is going on when God speaks to Abraham and Sara. That is what God is about when Jesus is born in Bethlehem. That is what God is about when Jesus willingly gave his life on the cross, died and was resurrected from the dead. God is good. God is loving. God is about life, love and grace. And that God knows us, loves us, claims us and calls on us to respond. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” (Luke 10:27)

The decision that shapes both our lives and our destinies is the choice to believe this or not. And if we believe this, then we must be changed.

The prophet Isaiah prophesies of destruction and annihilation because the people have refused to live in this truth. They have said that they believed in and loved God. But then they only acted in their own best interest – they loved only themselves. Their hypocrisy and self-deception showed itself in their inability or unwillingness to love as God loves. They refused to cease doing evil and learn to do good. They refused to seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan or plead for the widow.

The marks of the one who knows God, loves God and serves God are BOTH Love and Justice. BOTH! This is not a multiple choice. And once we recognize both the reality of God and the invitation of God, then we can acknowledge that the root of our fear, suffering and insecurity is our own choice to reject God’s invitation and to live in the world as if God does not exist.

Jesus can say to his followers, “do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms.” Collect for yourself the treasure that is in heaven where there is no uncertainty or anxiety. “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Lk 12:34)

And when we live and claim that God and that truth, then we live differently. The point of Jesus’ example is not that we must stay awake for 24 hours and be nervous about when God will show up. But that how we live our everyday lives and how we do our assigned chores reflects our truth. Do you and I live in the reality that our Master and God will return for us – faithfully serving even when we don’t see God around – or do we (when we can’t see God present) start to protect ourselves, serve ourselves, secure ourselves, set our own agendas?

If we do that, then God's coming will be blessing and abundance and rest and grace. If we don't, then God's coming will be very bad news. How we respond to the truth of God's nature and invitation determines whether we should be very afraid or not afraid. Knowing the Eternal and All-Powerful God helps us know when to be rightly and appropriately afraid and when our fear is neurotic and delusional.

So, what are we to do? The first thing I think we all need to do is to read Scripture (all of Scripture) for ourselves. Don't think that following along while we read Scripture together on Sundays is enough. Seek to answer the "what are we to do?" question for yourself. But, what is on my short list of "to do's" are the following.

- Seek to love as I have been loved by God – unconditionally with without needing proof of perfection, moral correctness or only loving those who agree with me.
- Figuring out how to give more away so that I will depend less on what I have and learn to live with less.
- Choosing a way to work on justice. We can no longer deny that we -you and I -must be engaged in some way (either actively ourselves or supporting those who will) in seeking justice. I am grateful – even when I am not always comfortable – with our congregations' commitment to participate in the MORE Justice Ministry. It is the first time in my life as a follower of Jesus that we have tried to risk asking for measurable and accomplishable steps to advocate for those who cannot advocate for themselves. If you don't have a plan for how to work towards justice for others, then I suggest that you seriously consider participating in the annual cycle of discernment and action that the MORE Justice organization provides. You can start by participating in a house meeting. There is more information in your bulletin. And if you don't want to do that, then Isaiah says that you need to figure out how to do justice some other way.

You know the classic fairy tale story line of the poor and unknown person who is suddenly revealed to be a Queen or King and is then given power and riches and authority? Think of Cinderella or Aladdin. Well, what Jesus says is that God has given us the Kingdom – the Kingdom of Heaven. We are beloved, claimed, blessed and redeemed. WE can reject or deny this existence and reality as God allows us to refuse to live out of our true identity. But even if we deny this true identity, it does not make it untrue. Our refusal of our true identity only causes us pain and suffering and makes us afraid of snakes under our carpet.

We are invited to live in the acknowledgement of the reality that our Master is the Good and True Ruler of the Universe who will return for us knows us and will provide for us. So, we need not fear. But we do need to live every day in that truth that changes how we see who we are, what we have and what is important to do and to be. Those who know this truth are not afraid to earnestly pray, "Come Lord Jesus, Come!"

ⁱ Strength to Love by Martin Luther King, Jr. Text copyright 1963; Fortress Press copyright 2010.