



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. LINZI STAHLECKER, CURATE
THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT, DECEMBER 18, 2022
ISAIAH 7:10-16, PSALM 80:1-7, 16-18, ROMANS 1:1-7, MATTHEW 1:18-25

THE OPPOSITE OF LOVE ... IS FEAR

Matthew 1: 18-25 *[Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.]"*

I'm not sure who gets the credit for this, but there is a pithy quote that wisely states: "the opposite of love isn't hate ... it's fear." As is often the case, the English language offers little by way of nuance with these two heavy-hitter words, both love and fear each being used in a wide variety of ways. And so both words can potentially lose a bit of their

meaning, as both can be over used, and their meanings can trend and change over time: love can be understood as the stuff of "Hallmark" moments, as romantic and sentimental, and fear, it unhelpfully can be seen as an expression of weakness or associated with cowardice.

And so it's good for us to recalibrate our understanding of both these important words through Scripture, setting to one side the way we have become culturally attuned to them both.

We each of us face daily the stuff of life, much of which can bring on feelings of fear. Fear in response to physical danger or threat or illness. Existential fear, or fear in response to perceived threats to the self: the fear of losing respect or reputation, of being ridiculed, the fear of being judged, excluded, the fear of not having or being enough. To combat fear, the world around us offers some quick claims to safety. We attempt to protect our physical safety with guns, and prisons, police, and military, and we attempt to protect the self through the accumulation of power and wealth, by conforming to cultural standards or expectations, and by aligning or associating ourselves with large and powerful systems and institutions. These things can feel like protective fortresses of a sort, protection from the dangers and threats of the world, structures behind which to hunker down and in which to feel safe in response to our fears.

But scripture teaches us that trying to find safety by tackling fear in the ways that the world offers up ... Scripture teaches us this is a futile effort – and that it's dangerous, that

it's actually a root and cause of great suffering, because we will often go to incredible lengths to aggressively, violently even defend our worldly fortresses.

“Do not be afraid” is the Bible's most repeated directive. Scripture understands God to be our true fortress, a true place of safety within which we all have a place to shelter. Our call to love God is laid out as the way to know true safety - the only way to be free of fear is to practice trusting in that love. Practice. Through intention and repeated action, spiritual practice and constant prayer. This is to be our fortress, our protection, and our strength. This. That is, love.

And this is illustrated well, I think, in our gospel reading today. Joseph is the focus of all the action, and Joseph, we are told, is a righteous man.

Now, when we hear the word righteous today, it's a loaded word, right? Perhaps you imagine a person confident, certain of their own goodness, their morality, their faithfulness ... I wonder if your imagining of righteousness also carries with it an air of superiority. I'm aware that righteousness for me has become blended somewhat in my mind with self-righteousness, but that's an entirely different thing - and exploring righteousness in its Scriptural context shows

us that. Righteous, here, in our reading from Matthew, the word chosen to describe Joseph, “righteous” captures a way of living life that is deeply connected with that love that originates in God, is from God, and is poured out for God – it’s certainly not the surface-level love of the Hallmark kind – it’s the love that is the most powerful of all forces and is bound to action. “Righteous” describes a life being lived in a way that makes the love of God real and present through action in the world, it is the result, the stuff, of a life centered on God.

In Jewish tradition, righteousness is fundamental to a faithful life, and the telling of Matthew’s gospel picks this up, and emphasizes its importance throughout the Gospel text. Righteousness is often associated with generous giving to those who are poor, righteousness is a way of more fully describing a generous act, an action born out of the love of God. Practicing a way of living that sees loving God as a primary task, spills, then, into a generous and just way of living that honors the divine spark, the image of God, in each and every person. This is what it is to be righteous ... it is faithfulness and love, in action.

Joseph, in his time, had many things to fear. The oppressive and dangerous reality of Jewish life under the Roman Empire, being

pushed about by the local ruling classes, all of this could surely have justified Joseph acting out of fear. Joseph would, after all, have been shaped by cultural forces that expected him to behave in certain ways when faced with certain situations ... the way for him to stay safe, to stay alive, to stay a respected member of his community amidst all the demands made of him was clearly laid out: do what’s expected of you, and conform to the norms and standards put in place by the dominant group, and you will be safe. Safe, perhaps, and alive, but likely full of fear and feeling far from God. Had Joseph been a fearful man, who out his fear did what was expected of him, things wouldn’t have turned out so good for Mary or for the baby she was carrying.

Righteousness is a protection from fear-driven conformity, righteousness is courage to act instead with loving and generous intention, even when this puts us at odds with the world around us. Righteousness is acting from the conviction that God is the source of all strength, the source of all love, the reason and purpose of our lives.

Righteousness is lived faithfulness to God ... cultivated through intention and repeated action, spiritual practice and constant prayer.

And so we learn from this snippet of Matthew’s gospel, the scene-setting for Jesus’

birth, we learn of the critical role righteousness plays in making the coming of the Messiah possible, making Jesus' birth possible. Righteousness, which then is perfected through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Righteousness is the ground on which the Gospel Way is laid.

This snippet of Matthew's gospel text teaches us to trust that the love of God is a power that can obliterate fear and set us free to act generously, justly ... and that our lives are to be the way this truth is let loose in the world, to prepare it, so that divine creativity, justice, freedom and fullness of life can be born.



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