

January 9, 2022
Baptism of Jesus

Meditation: Fear Not
Fear.

There's a lot of it about these days. Fear of catching Covid. Fear of dying. Fear of never being able to travel or see friends or extended family or go out to a restaurant for dinner or to the theatre for a show again. Fear that our job is gone forever, or our business will go bankrupt, or our investments will fail. Fear of those whose vaccine status we don't know. Fear that it doesn't matter, they are a potential risk to our health anyway. Fear that this is never going to go away and that life will never return to normal, like it was in 2019. Fear for ourselves. Fear for our elders. Fear for our children. Fear for our families. And don't get me started on climate change, or.....

What a powerful thing it is. It can and does motivate our behaviour. Sometimes that is a good thing. Personally, I fear jumping out of an airplane at 1000 meters without a parachute. It's not the falling that I fear, but the sudden stop at the end of the fall. Fear can keep us from taking foolish risks. But fear can also result in irrational behaviour, and suspicion of 'others', and even hatred of 'others'. Political leaders know this, and have used it to galvanize their people against an 'enemy'. We call it propaganda. Jews, Germans, North Koreans, South Koreans, Palestinians, Muslims, Christians, coronavirus, anti-vaxxers. Fear can lead us to create systems that we think will protect us from the 'other', from the 'enemy', but all it really accomplishes is to separate us into groups and causes us to treat one another unfairly. Fear can cause us to be hypervigilant to a perceived threat, to engage in racial profiling, to jump into a truck and run over a Muslim family, or a thousand other irrational things.

When Israel was in captivity in Babylon they feared. They feared they would never get home. They feared that God was not with them in this strange land. They feared they were worthless.

Even Jesus, as he hung on the cross, feared. You remember the story. You remember the line. "My God. My God. Why have you forsaken me?" He feared that he was alone.

Guess what one of the most common commandments in the Bible is? "Fear not."

Fear not.

Fear can be all consuming, filling up every nook and cranny of our being, leaving absolutely no room for thought of anyone else, including God. I would say that fear is the

opposite of faith, because fear is all about us, or our kind, or group, and when we make ourselves the center of everything, we leave no room for God. When fear becomes all consuming, we build wall around ourselves, literally and figuratively. When fear becomes all consuming, it prevents us not only from thinking of others, but it also prevents us from truly living, of being who we were created to be. This is as true for groups, like the local Odd Fellows chapter, as it is for individuals.

Today we read about the baptism of Jesus. And when he had been baptized, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." At that moment, Jesus knew that God was with him, and would never leave him. At that moment, he knew he would never be alone, or unloved.

The same is true of every one of us. At our baptism, the Holy Spirit was present, God was present, and remains present with us to the end of our days, and beyond. Oh sure, there may be times when we feel forsaken of God, like Jesus did on the cross, but God has not forsaken us. God did not promise that life would be happily ever after, like some fairy tale. Rather, God promised us there would be trials of fire and flood. God also promised that the fire would not consume us, just as the fire did not consume the bush, or the disciples on the day of Pentecost. God promised that the flood would not overwhelm us, just as it did not overwhelm the Israelites when they passed through the waters of the Red Sea to escape Egypt, or again as they passed through the waters of the Jordan to enter the promised land, or as Jesus entered the waters of the Jordan at his baptism.

Jesus knew, from the moment of his baptism, if not before, that God was with him. And that faith, that certainty, is what enabled him to set aside his own personal uncertainties in order to fulfill his calling as a teacher, a healer, a miracle worker, as God's anointed one. We too have been baptized with water and Spirit.

For the last couple of years our focus has been almost solely on ourselves. How will we remain a worshipping community if we can't be in our building, together? How will we continue to pay the bills without the ability to pass the plate or to hold fundraisers? And while these are legitimate concerns, the flood has not overwhelmed, nor the fire consumed. We are still here, still gathered as a worshipping community. But are we acting like the Body of Christ? Have we been so focused on our own survival that we have forgotten why God called us together? Are we living out our faith for others?

I'm not suggesting that we take foolish risks, or break public health protocols. But I am suggesting that we set fear aside and be open to the Spirit's call on us at this time and place in history. What are the real needs of those around us? First-St. Andrew's in

London saw the plight of the homeless in downtown London and have opened their doors to offer food and a warm sheltering place for the night. What are the unmet needs in our community that we are able to address? Some may say that we need to take care of our own survival, or we won't be there for others later. I say, if you aren't there for others in need now, what is the point of your current existence?

Truly I tell you, "Do Not Fear, for God is with you." Be open to the Spirit, and to one another, especially those outside of the worshipping community. Treat each other with respect and dignity and fairness. Look for new ideas and new ways of being the Body of Christ – as we have done by moving to virtual worship. Do not fear, for God is with you. Like Jesus at his baptism, you too have been called God's beloved. Thanks be to God.