

“Inside Fear”

February 28, 2016

From the Inside Out series – 3rd Sunday in Lent

It’s hard to see your dad scared, especially when you’re not used to it. My dad celebrates his 76th birthday tomorrow - or his 19th birthday if you’re going by leap years. And you’ve joined me in prayer for him as he’s dealt with health issues over the past year. This summer, when he was going in for a shot to relieve pain in his back, he was scared. My mom was nervous for him, and my sisters and I feeling for both of them.

Fear was overwhelming. I’m glad to say that it dissipated when the procedure was over, but it was hard. And I know my dad’s not alone. We are fearful. As a congregation, we’re entering into a merger with Lakeside - and we may have fear about how it will all turn out. On a personal level, it didn’t take long for us to fill up the board outside with our fears: failure, the future, pain, cancer, Alzheimer’s, safety for myself and my kids, the dark, being alone, the unknown, losing independence, having to move, job loss, violence, money problems, death - and that’s just part of the list!

The violence in Kalamazoo last week and reports of violence from around the country may produce fear. We seek to respond in ways that bring comfort and help, but we also struggle to keep our faith stronger than our fear, to believe that good is still stronger than evil, to keep on going.

We’re inching toward the halfway point in this season of Lent as we look at ourselves from the inside out. We’ve focused inside temptation with Jesus in the wilderness as he overcame the devil’s propositions. We’ve looked inside doubt with Abram and discovered that our questions and wonderings are a part of our faith journey. I also want to say that it’s OK if you feel at peace with God. Today we meet Jesus as he’s making his way to Jerusalem. He’s confronted by the reality of suffering and the questions that we have about it.

And the people are afraid. Jesus addresses two separate incidents - the murder of some Galileans by Pilate and death of some after a tower fell. And what we encounter is familiar. When we become fearful, we also can get stuck. The people around Jesus are stuck at a place of asking about others. As he does so many times, he changes the game and the whole conversation. While they want to hear about what those people did to deserve what happened to them, Jesus tells them to reflect on themselves.

Jesus moves the conversation and calls us to repent, and he doesn’t make a distinction between suffering that simply happens and suffering that’s brought on by our sin. In Jesus’ time, folks thought that any suffering was a direct result of personal

sin – period. But it’s not that easy. We know how many times natural disasters strike - earthquakes, hurricanes. People die; others are left homeless and in despair. And unfortunately, some have tried to make sense of it – saying that it’s brought on by God’s wrath.

To be clear, that’s not Gospel truth. Jesus is clear that sin isn’t the determination. We can look around and try to figure out others’ spiritual lives. And we do that quite often. The crowd around Jesus asks him about a specific tragedy. We do the same, whether it’s a natural disaster or a result of human action. Why did it happen? What brought it on? Jesus says that if we truly care about our relationship with God, then we should be more self-reflective and self-directed. Quit looking around and making judgments and think about your own life situation.

We also make bad choices that bring consequences. We become addicted to vices that take over our lives. We hurt one another with actions and words. Our sin pulls us away from God and one another when we’ve been created to be in relationship. Jesus says that we’re accountable to God and one another for our behavior.

Jesus tells us to repent. Repentance is about turning around and taking a new way – about making deliberate and real change. It’s about overcoming our self-centeredness and trying to be more God-centered. But repentance is not just a nagging call from Jesus. Consider this: repentance is a word of grace because repentance carries the promise of forgiveness.

Repentance is a vital part of Christian faith. Even today, some portray that faith in Christ brings the promise of a successful, prosperous, “no worries” life. But that’s never been the case! Jesus Christ did not live that life, and neither do we. He was dealing with real tragedies and real people who had real questions about real things. He was dealing with fear!

A story is told that 19th century theologian Soren Kirkegaard said, “I went into church and sat on the velvet pew. I watched as the sun came shining through the stained-glass windows. The minister, dressed in a velvet robe, opened the golden gilded Bible, marked it with a silk bookmark and said, “If any man will be my disciple, said Jesus, let him deny himself, take up his cross, sell what he has, give it to the poor, and follow me.” And I looked around and nobody was laughing.”

Kirkegaard’s observation stops us cold because we struggle with the Gospel. Christianity doesn’t plunge us into suffering for the sake of suffering, but walking with Jesus takes us into places of sacrifice. We have to face ourselves. We have to repent. We have to trust in God’s abundant life above everything else.

A colleague of mine commented that pain and fear are usually the only factors that bring change in our lives. We talk about the need for change, but until something

happens when we see that need more clearly, it won't happen. Sometimes it takes a serious problem or even a tragedy in our own life before we look at ourselves and see what needs to change – whether it's our attitude, our lifestyle, our priorities, our relationships.

Yes, God offers what we need – forgiveness – but we have to open our hearts to receive it. Receiving it means to repent – to turn around and walk again with God – and then to live a holy life staying connected to God, knowing that we'll need to continuously repent and return to God. It's not a one-time thing – or even a ten-time thing. It's a daily thing. That's why part of worship is the confession that that we are sinners in need of God's amazing grace. We open up to God.

But we also can't fall into an "I'm a terrible person" routine. There is joy here, friends. Jesus talks about repentance, but he also talks about God's patience and love. We always hear words of assurance from God when we confess – that God loves us and Christ died for us while we were sinners. Repentance isn't something we do to avoid God's wrath. The Christian life motto isn't "if you're bad, God will zap you." We repent because we can trust in God's forgiveness.

This story of the fig tree would have perked the ears of those listening to Jesus. First, it would be strange to have a fig tree that didn't grow well. Figs are pretty easy to grow. They usually grow in warm climates, but they can survive in cooler temperatures, too. We brought a fig tree home from Croatia where figs grow in abundance. And they don't require much fertilizer (remember it means manure!) either.

And that's the real kicker to the story of the fig tree. This is the only place in the New Testament where the word "manure" appears, and surely Jesus used it with a purpose. Perhaps it was a slight insult the religious leaders of the day. But there's something more to it. As someone puts it, "When the gardener volunteers not to give up on the slow-to-fruit fig tree, he commits himself to a year of shoveling manure."

Think of that! For me and for you, God does not and will not give up on us. That's Gospel truth – and Good News.

The reality of God's judgment is not something to ignore. It will happen, and we experience it in our lives when we're convicted of our own sin. But with that judgment comes an invitation from God to repent and turn around to a new way of living. With that judgment comes an invitation to live a grace-filled life of trust and hope because of God's forgiveness.

I'm not much of a gardener, but consider this image. We do not make our repentance at the blade of an axe, but rather through the tines of a trowel. All of us must repent. We must re-orient our lives to the priorities of God's kingdom. And yet the invitation is there for you and me. As one pastor puts it, "God is not waiting for us

to figure out everything, not hesitating to act until there is evidence that we will put our questions aside.” God is always offering the invitation to repent and receive for forgiveness.

Just like the video reminds us, we don’t have to be afraid. Will we choose to believe in God’s grace – to believe that it’s bigger, stronger, wider, higher, and deeper than our fear? And will we share those fears trusting that sharing them will help us to keep them from overtaking our faith?

Maybe you saw the stairway leading up to the Lounge as you came in this morning. *You don’t have to see the whole staircase; just take the first step.* God takes the initiative to love us, and the challenge is to see ourselves in light of God’s love - those who need God’s grace and who need to turn around and walk with God. Friends, our fears are normal, but God’s grace is sufficient, and our faith is enough to carry us.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.