

Sermon 1-27-19  
Pastor Ray Lorthioir  
Trinity Lutheran Church  
W. Hempstead, NY

Based on the Second Lesson for The third Sunday after Epiphany, 1Corinthians 12:12-31

### **Real Fear**

Back in 2010 Carol and I took a very normal flight from Orlando Florida back to New York. The TV screen in front of me showed that we were crossing over southern New Jersey smoothly descending into JFK at about 25,000 feet when suddenly, without warning, the plane hit a giant pothole in the sky. The hull thundered and shook as if we were going through an earthquake. The wings were waving like a seagull's. I've been in turbulence before but this was different. It was as if a giant hand had grabbed the plane and was threatening to shake it to pieces. The seatbelt sign came on and the crew ran for a seat. I remember three separate shocks each one more violent than the last. In expectation that the next one would be even worse, I finally called upon the name of the Lord as did Carol alongside me. The next one was bad but not worse, and gradually the pounding lessened until we broke out into smooth air below. The rest of the flight was entirely uneventful. We came down in one piece. But that was a moment of fear: Real Fear.

Like death, fear plays a special role in this world. It's our purpose to explore it a bit today concerning spiritual gifts.

Adam and Eve declared independence from God for themselves and for us when they ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. But no matter how much anyone desires to get away from the One True God here on this earth, they can't. God refuses to go away. After all, this is His earth. We are His creatures. Our existence is His idea. His heart yearns after us. There is, therefore, a connection between this desire of God and death. Physical death was not simply a penalty for eating of the tree. It was the condition God imposed on a fallen world so that we rebels might seek Him. Since we do not naturally desire a relationship with our Creator, death is designed to drive us into the arms of God. It's coercion back into a relationship with God. Indeed, death causes every human to cry out, why am I here? Why was I born? What is this all about? It causes us to seek for answers. And without knowing it, we thereby seek for God.

In this regard, the threat of eternal death serves the same purpose. God will oblige all those who desire to enter a godless eternity, independent of Him. The residents of hell will get exactly what they desire: total freedom; in particular, freedom from God. The main feature of hell is not the heat. It's the fact that God will not be there at all. Consequently, the great goodness of God will also be lacking. Those in hell will be left with the worst of the worst. They themselves will become the worst of the worst, embracing a free fall into eternal wickedness without a bottom. There will be no hope, no help. There will be no God to cry out to, and no end to it. Now, that's fear: Real Fear of the eternal variety. Do you want to go there?

But fear can also engage us in a less than eternal way. The entire experience of the human race with God has been mostly based on fear. As we all know, it's very easy to live under the delusion that God is not intimately and immediately present in this world. After all, things go on normally day after day, unless something like an earthquake, tsunami or hurricane wakes us up to the terrible fragility of human life. But sometimes God directly reveals His hand in ways that part the curtain separating that which is seen from what is unseen. It's at those moments that fear plays a role.

It's not for nothing that fearsome things happen in the Bible. In Genesis 28 Jacob is sleeping out in the open country with a stone for a pillow. He has a dream and in the dream God appears to Him giving Him the same promise given to Abraham and Isaac that his descendants would inherit what is now known as Israel and Palestine. In addition he sees angels traveling between earth and heaven on a giant staircase. It says in Genesis 28:16-17, "When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, 'Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it.' He was afraid and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.'"

Early in His ministry Jesus was asleep in the back of a fishing boat on the Sea of Galilee while his disciples sailed the boat. A furious squall came up and the boat was in danger of sinking. How anyone could sleep in such conditions I don't know, but Jesus slept the sleep of the exhausted. Finally His disciples woke him to do something. Mark 4:39-41 tells us that "He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, 'Quiet! Be still!' Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. He said to his disciples, 'Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?' They were terrified and asked each other, 'Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!'"

Going to the other side of the lake they came to a place where a totally deranged man lived among the tombs. As Jesus approached the man, an evil spirit cried out of him in terror at a confrontation with God's Son. The result was that Jesus cast a legion of demons out of the man into a herd of pigs grazing nearby. The pigs immediately stampeded off a nearby cliff into the lake and were drowned. Meanwhile, the deranged man fully regained his sanity and his humanity. The herdsmen ran into the local village and told the news. When the local people arrived and saw the man fully healed they were greatly afraid and asked Jesus to leave. You can read about it in Mark 5:1-17.

Why did they ask Jesus to leave? Wouldn't it be a good thing to have a healer like that around? Apparently not if He did things like drive out unseen demons. When the unseen and unrecognized suddenly become all too real it can be quite terrifying. Better not to have such a person around. The next thing you know He might be looking into your life with a prophet's vision and calling on you to repent, like he did to the woman at the well in John 4. Even worse, He might just be the Son of God! It's better He should leave.

Even at His crucifixion Jesus created terror. When he died there was an earthquake and other amazing events. Matthew 27:54 tells us, "When the [Roman] centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all

that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, 'Surely he was the Son of God!'"

There are plenty more places to which we could turn in order to demonstrate that God has these ways of encountering people that create real fear. Why does He do this? He wants to momentarily and publicly display the glory that He normally keeps hidden from us. He does this to drive us to the salvation revealed in the cross of Jesus Christ.

For the last 2,000 years, God's main way of revealing His glory to us has been through the cross of Jesus Christ. That's why we preach the cross of Christ. Just as many things were revealed out of many hearts on the day of Jesus' crucifixion, so the news of the cross still does the same. There are those who still scoff and say, if you were the Son of God, why couldn't you come down from the cross? Why did you allow yourself to be crucified as a common criminal? Was it because you were only a miserable fraud and couldn't do anything about it? Today there are even those who mock and say Jesus was never crucified at all. He fled the scene and had a love child with Mary Magdalene, or He somehow survived it only to die of old age in India's Kashmir or in Africa. The reason for this is that the cross deeply offends all. It says that the Son of God Himself had to die for the evil deeds for which we could never atone. That's a bitter challenging pill to swallow!

On the other hand, there are still those today who receive God's comfort from the cross, the same comfort that the repentant thief received, the one crucified with Jesus who perceived Jesus' innocence, righteousness and glory, even on the cross, and cried out to Him, "Lord remember me when you come into your Kingdom!" Just hours or minutes from the final agonizing breaths that would make Jesus' promise possible, Jesus promised to him, "today you will be with me in paradise." You can read about that in Luke 23:39-43. He still promises this to all who call on His name.

Jesus' cross reveals God's glory because it most completely transcends the gap between the hidden world and the visible. A crucifixion is visible. It takes place in normal space and time. It happened to thousands in the ancient world. But the crucifixion of this particular man, Jesus, was much more. It reached all the way to the great invisible temple in heaven where a way now has been opened for rebellious people to be reconciled with God, their Maker. This is what is revealed to us in Scripture. Incredibly, it is in the hideous cross of Jesus Christ that the glory of Almighty God is most clearly revealed to us. Scripture declares this and thereby challenges all people of all time to return to God, their Creator, through Jesus Christ, His Son.

The cross, therefore, remains the chief challenge that God uses against all sinners. However, there is a source of secondary challenge that God uses to drive unbelievers to the cross. Upon completing His work of salvation and then being resurrected, Jesus did a most important thing after His ascension into heaven. He poured out the Holy Spirit upon all peoples so that we might believe in Him. Beginning with the Apostles and continuing into our time, therefore, God has used this ministry of the Holy Spirit through us, his people, to create fear in the hearts of unbelievers and drive them to Himself. The entire book of Acts tells how God did this in the time of the Apostles.

The passage that we've had as our second reading for the last two weeks, 1 Corinthians 12, speaks of many of the spiritual gifts poured out upon the Apostles and the believers of the first century. It was through these activities of the Holy Spirit in the lives of those who had believed in Jesus that God challenged the hearts of many. As we have seen, God is not above breaking into the everyday routine of life to create fear, consternation and curiosity. Therefore, the spiritual gifts operate just like the miraculous works that Jesus performed in His ministry. They draw attention to Jesus and God uses them to herd observers toward the crisis of life and faith which Christ's cross presents to us all. When God's hand reaches from eternity through a window into our daily existence, it causes a whole lot of fear.

Now, some of the spiritual gifts, like teaching and helping others are easier to accept and appreciate than the rest. They seem fairly ordinary. On the other hand – working in miracles, having accurate knowledge from God to confront or comfort others in what they are thinking and doing, correctly predicting future events, being able to distinguish the presence and activity of spirits, bringing complete healing in the Name of Jesus – these are all positively frightening. We're usually glad that they happen infrequently or not at all. Even the strange little gift of praying to God in languages you've never learned causes an enormous stir. It's been known to divide congregations and ruin ministries. It's been known to make people run for the hills. Why? There's an incredible amount of fear associated with it.

Consider this. If on a routine daily basis you dealt with God face to face, if you could see angels and could easily tell the good guys from the bad, if you frequently used power from God to heal all ills and if you were filled with all goodness and light so that you never sinned, then no such thing as a spiritual gift would faze you at all. In fact, the picture I've just drawn is not too dissimilar from what our actual life in Jesus after death will be like. And we'll be completely comfortable with it. But that's not true here and now, is it? Spiritual gifts are highly discomfiting and that's no mistake.

But why, then, does God pour them out on His Church when they seem to cause nothing but trouble and fear? Why does He trust repentant sinners with His gracious gifts? Why are we told in 1 Corinthians 12:7 that these gifts are for the common good of God's people? Why are we not to be ignorant of them, as is said in 1 Corinthians 12:1? Why should we zealously desire them as we're told in 1 Corinthians 12:31?

As far as I can tell, again, God uses spiritual gifts for the same reason He worked the ten plagues on Egypt, or had Jesus heal the sick, calm the storm and resuscitate the dead. He uses them for the same reason He raised Jesus from the dead. He wants to momentarily and publicly display the glory that He normally keeps hidden from us, so to drive us to the salvation revealed in the cross of Jesus Christ.

I remember in 1977 when I first read about modern people speaking in tongues. I had no clue what it was about, but it seemed to me that I should sooner rock climb the outside walls of the Empire State Building to the top than go near somebody doing that. It sounded positively terrifying. Over the years, I have met many others who were as terrified as I was, both inside and outside of the Church.

Looking back I can detect four reasons for my fear of this gift and all the other extra-ordinary ones. First and foremost, I was **lacking life in Christ** at the time.

Although I was serving in the church, I had many doubts. I was not sure that God existed. I was not sure that the Jesus of the Bible was real. I was terrified of dying and had no assurance of anything beyond the gates of death. I wasn't even certain there was a hell. How, then, could I know for myself the excellent mercy of God in Christ Jesus through the cross? I could speak the doctrine of Christ's Church, more or less, but I was all confused and adrift within my own heart. I was in the condition that Ephesians 2:1 calls, "dead in your transgressions and sins," as opposed to what Ephesians 2:5 calls "made alive in Christ." If there is anyone here like I was at that time – you're coming to church but you're not sure – let's talk. Jesus wants you to have certainty in your heart.

Second, I was **laboring under a non-Christian worldview** at the time. In the university and even in seminary I had been indoctrinated in anti-Christian philosophy and thinking. I knew of no answers to skeptical philosophers such as David Hume and the monopoly that Philosophical Materialism had in the sciences seemed to be airtight. I wanted miracles to exist. But I was terribly afraid of them since there would be no way to fit them into the worldview in which I had been trained and with which I was comfortable. But in this way I'm not unique. Not all of you have been educated beyond your intelligence as I was. Nevertheless, the worldview of Philosophical Naturalism prevails in this culture. It's part of you whether you like it or not. You soaked it up from your parents and teachers, your leaders, even your pastors. More than anything, I think this is the overall reason we're terrified of God's interventions in our world. It just doesn't fit our worldview. It's more than we can handle. It makes us flee. At least, that's what it did to me.

Now being made alive in Christ cured a lot of this headache for me. It will for you too. But, in addition, we live in a blessed time. In the last forty years, solid Christian thinkers have come up with good reasons why Philosophical Naturalism and the atheism it breeds is a defective worldview. If you need strengthening in this area, let's talk.

Third, I realize that I had **no trust history with God**. What do I mean by that? When we are exposed to the Word of God, there comes a point when we have to believe what we've read and heard, or not. There comes a time when we are tested on that very Word. Will we trust God or not. At that point, then, either God's grace will cause assurance to spring up inside of us or we will walk away unchanged. Either we will enter new dimensions of relationship with God through that verse or we'll continue to ignore Him. Either we'll come in from the cold, or not.

This trust process extends to the spiritual gifts. If I am unsure of God's Word concerning them, then I will flee from them in terror. But first I must be sure of God's favor and grace to me in that same Word.

How's your trust history with God? You'll have trouble trusting God concerning spiritual gifts if you have trouble trusting Him concerning His judgment of your life, His willingness to forgive your sins in Jesus Christ, His desire to give you new life as His child, and His ability to lead you in the paths of right living for His own name's sake. What's the solution? Call upon the name of the Lord so that you may believe Him and act upon His Word.

Fourth, I can tell you that I had only a **rudimentary Truth history with God**. Again, what do I mean by this?

Perhaps, as never before, in this day of internet and instant communication we can get to know people all over the world that we've never met in person. The more we text and write back and forth the more we know about another person. After a while we can say that we know them, even though we've never met them. We get to know the truth about them. That's what I mean by Truth history.

So it is with our God and our Lord Jesus Christ. The main way we get to know Him in truth is through His correspondence with us, the Bible. This is the same correspondence He has used with all people of every time and place. It never ceases to amaze me how ancient documents, like the Law of Moses, or the writings of the prophets or the letters of the Apostles can reveal so much about the God who is, even to 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans.

So, through the study of God's Word, do you know God well enough to know the kinds of things He does and the kinds of things He doesn't do? Do you know the truth about Him? Charlatans and false prophets are waiting for you if you don't.

Therefore, you need to know the Lord. You need to be well acquainted with Him through His personal correspondence with you. That's why we study the Bible. Then you will need have no fear of spiritual gifts. By the Word, you can tell what is of God and what is not.

Therefore, concerning spiritual gifts, let's be neither ignorant nor fearful of them. Paul encourages believers of all times to desire them so that God may accomplish His purposes through us. As Ephesians 2:10 says, "We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." That's the will of the Lord for the good works called spiritual gifts. Amen.

All Bible quotes are from the NIV.