

"FREE FROM FEAR"

December 15, 1991

Not much is known about Mary. The scripture tells us that she lived in the small town of Nazareth, and was engaged to a man named Joseph. She was a descendent of David and later had other children. Little else of her background is related. However, one specific our text shares is that Mary was "greatly troubled." She was so obviously, fearful, the angel was compelled to say "Do not be afraid, Mary."

The gospel writers state that Joseph was afraid. The shepherds, Zachariah and Paul, were afraid. When Jesus stilled the storm and cured the ill, they were fearful. The angel who came to announce the presence of God in Mary's life frightened her. Of what may you be anxious or afraid?

The writer's word for "fear" comes from the root word, "flee". What may you be running from today? Intimacy? Job? Marriage? Children? The demands and pressures of life in general? What we know of Mary, initially, is that she was afraid. And why would Luke choose that descriptor? Because he knew that God can come to us in our fears. God is the One who comes to us when we are afraid. "Hail O favored one, the Lord is with you!" (Luke 1:28). Your fear can bring you to God.

In the fear is the self-disclosure of God, just as when we are most vulnerable to other people, we are most revealing to them. "And the traditions of the self-disclosure of God", writes biblical scholar, Samuel Terrien, "suggest in one way or another the element of mysterium tremendum. There is a mystery in divine holiness that produces...a sense of terror" (1) The most sacred story of all, the birth of Jesus begins with an unknown woman who is terrified. What was she to do? She could have been killed. To bear a child, then, prior to marriage was punishable by stoning! It is good in this advent season for us to be reminded that the first message of Christianity is, "Do not fear," "Be not afraid."

In our weakness, God meets us-"regarding the low estate of his handmaiden" Mary says, When we are vulnerable, we are most available. When we are afraid, is when Gabriel can bring us the message of God's presence and grace.

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge," because not until I'm afraid will I begin to know God. And, how do we meet God in fear? Ask Mary or the shepherds. Ask anyone who has had the love of God break into his or her life. It has often been when they were first afraid.

The trouble is that we want the love without the fear, and then we wonder why we rarely experience the love. "The love of God", writes one expert, "is never separated from the fear of God...because absolute love means total surrender." (2) (This is a concept I'll return to later.) (3)

Stephanie Bush writes in her book entitled Life: A Warning, that, in a recent survey, 1,000 Americans were asked to name the fear that torments them the most. The first she identifies is the "fear of gradual hysteria."

Gradual hysteria is what happens when you feel your life is completely out of control. Many of us attempt to exert control by redecorating our homes, for example. We move a picture and find that there is a rectangular spot on the wall where the picture used to be. Then we move the TV stand and find that there are four identical indentations in the rug. Then someone starts drilling into the pavement outside the window, and the phone rings and we run to answer it, and hear only a metallic click and start to scream, very quietly. We feel that God is talking to us. "Just try it", God is saying. "Just try and make something out of your life."

There is so precious little in our lives that we really can control or attempt to take charge of, but, real life is not about desperately, anxious efforts at controlling, clinging, coercing or cajoling. My friends, I'm very concerned by what I see and experience on ever broadening horizons and deepening levels. There is so much fear today-it's an epidemic dictating far too much of our lives and living. Exacerbated and entrenched fears pervade relationships between neighbors, among friends, within families and marriages, in the office between business associates.

So many of our thoughts, decisions and actions, individually, communally and nationally are pervaded yea, dominated by fear. While it may not reveal itself overtly, the symptoms reflect so clearly, the underlying reality. And, the danger is that we become so thoroughly socialized to and indoctrinated by it, it becomes normative for us--we accept it without question as the solo modus operandi; that we don't even realize when we stepped into this river of fear-much less the impact it has upon us-debilitating our spirits and decaying relationships.

This way of living in the world is accepted as a given.-"This is the way the game is played." "If you can't take the heat, get out of the kitchen."

"Oh you want to play a little hardball?" "If you don't like the way it's played here, you know what you can do." Unrelenting, anxiety-driven pressures mount from ever increasing quarters-creating a "mentality of scarcity," convincing us that there simply isn't enough of whatever is a message we experience viscerally. The underlying, unarticulated if given voice-might cry out- "I just want to survive", or perhaps even less consciously, the message might be translated, "I'm afraid I won't make it." Intensified aggression and efforts to control bespeak the underlying fears.

So people begin to hoard. Defending, projecting, criticizing and attacking, building stronger walls of protection from the increasing number of perceived enemies they're identifying along the way, deluding themselves en route into believing that they are simply establishing security-exercising necessary leverage and power. What's wrong with that? The tragedy is that such folks are so long given to this reactivity that their apparent roads to relative freedom lead the opposite way. While in truth, imprisoning themselves through fear driven efforts for control.

Quite frankly, I'm concerned for the sanctuaries of our nation that they not be co-opted by the pervasive mind set as just another social institution. If within our churches we don't preserve a qualitatively different life and fellowship, where should we go for such? We need to watch and pray over this dynamic if we are to continue offering a free and fearless space in an otherwise fear-ridden world.

To the Pharises, Jesus talked about knowing the truth and the truth will make you free. Their response was: "we've never been in bondage to anyone. How can you say to us, "You will be made free?"

Jesus said "You're slaves to sin"and don't even know it!-life was created to be so much more than you are experiencing. "You're missing the mark,estranged from your essential selves from God and others. And so are we all at times. So how are we set free? Free from fears? I don't believe we can alone. God meets us in them and they may be profoundly real. Jesus had said to the Jews, "if you continue in my word you are truly my disciples, you will know the truth and the truth will make you free." However, he was not talking here about just disembodied truth-any truth at all. It is clear in this context that Jesus was talking about the truth about himself, what he was and who he was. Knowing that truth is the truth that makes us free. Any effective transformation from fear to freedom is relational. Following Christ;letting go of any self-deception

regarding ultimate control of our lives. It may be argued that there are only two basic emotions-Love and fear. All other emotions being their derivatives. And love may be understood as that "letting go of fear."

Love can overcome the fear if we can view the fear as a gift bringing God. And it is in such an encounter that our fears may be transformed into faith. It involves the fear of letting go and the letting go of fear-entrusting our life to God each day. Such acts of surrender may not generally be perceived as being positive suggesting vulnerability or weakness. But such surrender in faith is what we need to be free on an ongoing basis.

Further , we need the church, the people of faith,to walk with us into our dark nights of the soul, as we deal with the shady sides of our characters, as we may be frightened by our children, health, marriages, jobs or futures.

A story is told by an elderly pastor, who, in assessing his ministry, divided it into three phases. In the first phase he saw himself on the bank of the river. The people were in the river, and he was telling them how to get up on the bank where he was. In the second phase of his ministry he was on the bank reaching out to help the people get up on the bank where he was. In the third phase he had come to wisdom and understanding when he realized that he was in the river with the people and had always been so. They were holding each other up, and underneath them all were the everlasting arms of God. In my journey I have learned that if there is to be any healing, hope, and meaning in life, there must come the awareness and acceptance that in our pain, brokenness, and human limitation, we are all in the river together. As we support each other and bear one another's pain, brokenness, and human limitation, underneath us all are the everlasting arms of God. And when there is such an experience, fear diminishes and when there is no fear, there is no scarcity!

Then Christ of Christmas who comes to proclaim release to the captives and liberty to those who are oppressed becomes the Lord of Abundance, who has said, "In the world, you will have trouble-you will have fears, but be of good cheer, be of great Joy, for I have overcome the world!

- 1.) S. Terrien in the Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible (New York: Abingdon, 1962) Vol.2 p.257
- 2.) Ibid. p.258
- 3.) Hudnut, R. The Bootstrap Falacy: What the self Help Books Don't Tell you. (Cleveland: Collins, 1978)
- 4.) Bush, S. Life: A Warning (New York: Linden, 1987) p.20