

Homily – Gratitude in the Midst of Fear

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8:00am only

Advent and Lent are times of preparation, and often we stop doing things that are unhealthy or start doing things that are healthy. We eat better. We stop watching too much TV or Internet. We reconnect with our loved ones. We spend a little more time in prayer, reading the Bible or serving the poor. In addition, Advent can be a time of planning, planning how we will live life differently as individuals and as a community.

Last week, I preached about how we need to shift from fear to love. There is a lot of fear in our world these days, and that makes it even more important to focus on love. Shifting from fear to love is a great way to prepare for the coming of Jesus. This week I want to focus on gratitude as an antidote to the fear that we see around us.

A focus on gratitude may seem overly simplistic. It may even seem unsophisticated, childlike, or simple. The world is a complex place and a focus on thanksgiving has a streak of the Pollyanna.

One of my current book tapes is the third book in Ken Follet's series of historical fiction called "The Century Trilogy". So far, the stories have gone through World War One, the Russian Revolution, the Spanish Civil War and World War Two. As you would expect the Communist Soviet Union and Fascist Nazi German are depicted as being very brutal. Sometimes the horrors take your breath away and once I had to skip three minutes of the recording because it was much too gross. None of the brutality surprises me because the history books have taught us that these regimes were evil. However, I needed to take a little control of the horror that I was hearing in the book tape. I needed to turn it off. I could do that with a book tape, but what about the real world.

We still live in a world in which black men are disproportionately stopped, arrested and inadvertently killed by the police. Black lives matter!

We live in a world in which Hispanic immigrants live in terror and fear that they will be separated from family members and loved ones. Immigrant rights matter!

We live in a world that wants to demonize and dehumanize all Moslems because of the despicable acts of a few. Moslems matters!

We live in a world where we even condemn the truth-tellers. Instead, the rewards seem to be going to those that can tell bigger and more outrageous stories.

And, we live in world, which seems to be getting smaller. The brutal acts of a few make us look around in fear. We want to just withdraw and ignore it all.

We especially don't want to see the brutality, as we get ready for our annual remembrance of the birth of Jesus.

Two thousand years ago when Jesus was born life could be vicious. The life and death of Jesus are enduring reminders to us of that brutality. Jesus was tortured, and then horribly and messily executed. We know these things, but isn't that messy stuff for Holy Week and Easter? Aren't Advent and Christmas supposed to be the beautiful things? Can't we just be grateful for the rain? Thank you God for the rain.

Many of us want to ignore the world. But, God bursts the bubble of those who have their head in the sand – of those who ignore too much. Pride, power, and riches can make it easy for us to live in a bubble. We can remain happy in the midst of turmoil.

The phrase “shield the joyous” is a phrase that some of you will recognize from Compline, one of our going to bed prayers that we have in our Book of Common Prayer. “Tend the sick, Lord Christ; give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous;”

Here is an example of “shield the joyous.” Ten years, Jeff and I were married by Bishop Mary, and on the way home from our wedding Bishop Mary got a phone that her husband, Michael, had been killed in a cycling accident. We did not find out about the death of Bishop Mary's husband, Michael, until the morning after our wedding. Though the news broke in the early evening, we didn't see the emails. Our joy was shielded for an extra fourteen hours. We got to continue celebrating a bit longer before falling into grief. “Shield the joyous” was a gift we had from God on our wedding night. Thank you God.

We all want joy, and this third Sunday in Advent is when we usually focus on joy. The Apostle Paul wrote, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

Twenty-seven years ago, when going through my divorce, I found that all joy had been sucked out of my life. For those of you that have read Harry Potter, I was surrounded by Dementors – those evil beings who guard the prison of Azkaban, serve Lord Voldemort, and use a kiss to suck your soul out into oblivion. I found myself figuratively lying on the ground, while life happened around me.

And, then I learned that joy is a by-product. Joy comes when we are grateful. So, if I wanted joy back in my life, I needed to have thankfulness back in my life first. I needed to let go of resentments of those things I wanted but didn't have. I needed to let go and embrace gratitude for the things God had already done for me.

All this makes sense and it fits in with the beauty of Advent. We practice gratitude and the subsequent joy as we prepare for Christmas. But, what do I do with the messy, horrible life stuff like what is going on in Gaza?

In my own spiritual journey I often find the teachings of Jesus and of the Apostle Paul to be about balance. They are about helping us live in the tension between two things that seem like opposites. And, the tension that I am highlighting today is that tension between the feelings of gratitude and joy and the feelings of horror and anger. Using gratitude and joy to ignore the horror doesn't seem right, and staying in the midst of the darkness without any gratitude leaves me exhausted and despondent.

A moment ago, I read the first line of today's reading from the Apostle Paul, and here is the complete reading again. "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Often we focus on only the first part of this passage, but when we read all of it we see this tension between joy and horror, between thankfulness and anger.

Now, I would like to tell you how to live in this tension, but my own spiritual journey is not yet complete. I can tell you that the journey goes from thankfulness to joy and then on to horror and then to anger... but then back to thankfulness and joy.

We live in a world in which horrible things still occur. Part of our Advent time is to decide about those things with which we need to live differently as individuals and as a community. We want to move out of the simple joy that ignores the nasty things in the world. We want to use our joy to help us move into the world so that we can change the world. We want to live in that tension between gratitude and anger that allows us to be the hands and feet of Christ in the world. Two thousand years ago, Christ chose to be in the world and to be part of our world so that he could change the universe forever. I may not know how to walk in this tension, but I know enough to be in the tension. God is there, and I invite you to join me in that tension.