

Fear Killed the Rest

'It is I; do not be afraid.' --Jn 6:20

There is a parable from the ancient East about a deadly disease that meets up with a large family travelling by caravan to Baghdad. 'Why are you travelling to Baghdad?' asked the family elder. 'To take five thousand lives,' said the disease. On the way back, they met again. 'You deceived me,' said the family elder. 'You actually took 50,000 lives.' 'No,' insisted the disease. 'I took 5,000. Fear killed the rest.'

In our country today, everything is deeply polarized, including even this current pandemic, such that there are two very different ways of looking at what is happening. The liberal approach says that this virus is deadly serious, and could be mitigated by following science and tight federal mandates. The conservative approach is that the deadliness of this virus is greatly exaggerated; and that it can't be easily mitigated by science or laws. I don't think that these two different world views can be reconciled. People are just different, and the best we can do-what we have tried to do at St. Hagop-is to agree to disagree, err on the side of caution and respect each other in the process.

But while the conservative and liberal world views are fundamentally diverse on a dozen issues-including the pandemic-there is one aspect of our response in which we are deeply united. To see this, we have to turn down the noise of all who make their livings off of words of polarization and hear the words of the Prince of Peace. In today's reading, Jesus' seven simple words, **'It is I; do not be afraid.'** are both diagnosis and cure, not only for the coronavirus, but for the fear that killed the rest.

You see what unites liberals and conservatives and all people of every time, place and perspective is the anxiety that comes with being human. We fear the unknown and those not like us, we fear scarcity and exposure, and then of course there is our ultimate fear of death. We are all afraid, it's just that liberals and conservatives express and mask their fears in different ways. Liberals tend to manage fears with their heads and conservatives tend to face fear with their gut. But you can't think your way out of death, neither can you will it away in defiance. On the surface there is disagreement about coronavirus, but I wonder if that noise conveniently allows both parties to avoid the issue no one wants to talk about, death. With half a century of medical advancement, relative peace and wealth, for many in this country death had become controlled and predictable-schedule it in after 78.54 years. Coronavirus, however, reminds us for the first time in a long time, that death could happen any time, any place. Nobody wants to think much about that, but the resulting denial of death comes at a high price. Not able to name our fear, our anxiety festers. We hoard our possessions, we defend our tribe and we reinforce our egos. And because we can't talk about death, we also can't talk about life, even with those we love most. 'Mom and Dad, we don't have much time, so let's spend more of it together.' 'Brother and sister, life is too short, let's forgive and let live.'

Death is part of life, so to ignore death is also to ignore life. That's what today's Gospel reading reminds us. The disciples are caught in a deadly storm and fear for their lives. They don't know what is happening to them and if they will make it through alive. Far off on the other side, they see Jesus walking on the water and Jesus says to them "ἐγώ εἰμι, μὴ φοβηθήτε, **It is I, do not be afraid.**" Contrary to our society's conspiracy of silence on death, our church tradition takes every opportunity to keep death before us. Variations on this death defying scripture reading are assigned two to three times a year. The Scriptures repeat the phrases "Do not be afraid" and "Do not fear" more than 300 times from cover to cover, as one writer said, "The Bible repeats the command 'fear not' exactly 365 times, or once for each day of the year. It is as if to say there is no day in our lives when fear is not a present reality (Charles Allen)." Our church also keeps death before us in our sacred calendar. Following the life of Jesus, we can't help but see that the greatest life ever lived, was lived under the constant awareness of death.

So today, let us be open to the deeper lesson that coronavirus has for us, which has less to do with beliefs in science and personal freedoms and more to do with facing the fact that our time is borrowed and any day we may be called to give our life back to God. This is not morbid, and it is not fearful, it is realistic and hopeful if we know to whom we belong and what we are made for. For our Lord and our scriptures reminding us today that God will always be present on the

other side of that which we most fear. Bad things will happen to us and those we love, but God will be there. We will offend and hurt people, but God will be there. The unthinkable will become altogether thinkable, but God will be there. Let us remember Jesus' word to us in the midst of the many trials around us and the shadows within us. ***'It is I; do not be afraid.'*** For Jesus Christ is the one who removed the sting of death, and in doing so has guaranteed that the fear of death shall never kill the rest, now and always; amen.