

Year C, 2 Lent

March 17, 2019

✠ In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. AMEN

Do you remember these? I don't know if you can see it from way back there...it's a can of Underwood potted meat. This was staple from my childhood, and the really odd thing was, the label always kind of creeped me out. Remember the little red devil? I had to go buy a can to recall it, and the Underwood devil definitely looks more evil than I remember. I've been thinking about the devil...Satan...evil...whatever we want to call it, since Deacon Gaelyn preached last Sunday about evil and temptation and the need for our nourishment on God's Word in scripture.

The season of Lent focuses us on not giving in to temptation, those temptations which lead us away from God and the love of Jesus. As I've mulled over Gaelyn's sermon, I've come to the realization that there is a temptation that I really need to give up for Lent... and not just for Lent...but for always. It's a temptation... a weakness... that most of us have and some of us deal with it... and some of us don't deal with it at all. And that temptation is "fear".

Fear is natural. It's what keeps us alive. Fear is what makes us run from life-threatening danger. Fear helps us to survive. Fear gives us that gut feeling that something isn't right. Scientists call fear the "fight or flight" instinct. But there's another kind of fear. A fear that holds us back and keeps us from being the person or people God intends for us to be. I call it fear of the impossible.

That kind of fear paralyzes us with indecision and insecurity. That fear causes us to shut down. When we're fearful, we can't listen to what others are saying. When we're fearful, we might lash out, sometimes we hunker down – have you ever seen an armadillo or a hedgehog

that's defensive...fearful? They roll up into a tight ball, somewhat safe, but at the same time – unable to move – frozen in place.

I give into that kind of fear far too often. Fear is, unfortunately, often my default reaction. A big, complex job overwhelms me. There are too many pieces and parts, and I don't know where to start – I pull a full armadillo and curl up under my desk.

Where does that fear come from? I have to say, I believe our fears – our unfounded fears – are another manifestation of evil. Call it Satan, the devil, the evil one, the tempter, the accuser – call it evil. Anything that keeps us from living up to our full potential, anything that keeps us from exercising the gifts God has so generously given us, is evil. Evil works within us, casting doubt on ourselves, making us feel insecure; we mistrust ourselves and we mistrust the abilities and gifts God has given us. Evil makes us believe that we are alone, or that we don't have the strength and the courage to accomplish the tasks before us. We forget that God is with us in all things.

In our Old Testament reading this morning, I sense that fear and uncertainty in Abram's question to God. God has already promised Abram land and a future where his descendants would become a great nation. Up until the point in this morning's reading, God has already promised Abram four times – that all will be well... “Trust me,” God says. God has promised Abram that, even though the future looked dim... even though Abram couldn't possibly see how God's plan would pan out – God has promised Abram that he would become the father of a great nation. And, of course, that's exactly what happened. As Jesus told his disciples, “for God all things are possible.”¹

¹ Matthew 19:26

Fear grips individuals, and fear can grip communities. We might fear that God has called us to an impossible task, or that there won't be enough resources to take on the work to which God has called us. Too often we forget Jesus' words "...I came that [we] may have life, and have it abundantly."²

There *are* reasons to be fearful in this world; it would be naïve of me to say otherwise. As we saw on Friday, the world is becoming a more violent place and hatred has taken on a very bold, very public face. But we must never let fear or anxiety get in the way of our job of sharing the love of Jesus. We must never say, "the job is too big... or too daunting... or too expensive... or too complex... or it's never been done... we don't know how... or, worst of all, there isn't enough," because that is fear... that is evil speaking.

A prayer about uncertainty by Thomas Merton, a writer and Trappist monk, come to mind:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.

I do not see the road ahead of me.

I cannot know for certain where it will end.

and the fact that I think I am following your will
does not mean that I am actually doing so.

But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.

Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.

I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

² John 10:40

For this season of Lent, I'm giving up fear and uncertainty and anxiety and I'm taking on trust in God's guidance, and I challenge you to do the same. Share with me your challenges, your successes and your failures. I'm sure I'll fail, and when I do, I'm going to pick myself up, say a quick prayer, and continue on. I'm going to trust that the Spirit is leading me, guiding me to do God's will. And I'm going to remember Jesus' words in the Gospel of Matthew, when his disciples were most fearful: "why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"³

AMEN

Ad maiorem Dei gloriam

³ Mark 4:40