



Sermons from Northwood United Church

"There's Fire Out There!"

Acts 4:32-35, John 20:19-31

Will Sparks April 12, 2015

May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer.

So, there was once a rabbi who asked his disciples, "How do you know when the night is giving way and the morning is coming?" One of the followers stood and said, "Teacher, won't you know that night is fading when, through the dim light, you can see an animal and recognize whether it is a sheep or a dog?"

The rabbi answered, "No."

"Rabbi," asked another. "Won't you know that the dawn is coming when you can see clearly enough to distinguish whether a tree is a fig or an olive?"

"No," responded the teacher. "You'll know that the night has passed when you can look at any man and any woman and discern that you are looking at a brother or a sister. Until you can see with that clarity, the night will always be with us."

The disciples of Jesus were gathered in a room with the doors locked. It was soon after they had heard that the tomb had been empty and several among them had had an experience of Jesus. I get the sense that it had been one of those days when it feels like the night will never end. Isn't it time for dawn to break? Isn't it time for this nightmare to end, and for things to get back to normal?

They are in the upper room, locked away in fear. And I have to admit, they had some pretty reasonable things to be afraid of. This is immediately after the weekend when the one they had been following for 3 years, the one they had hoped would change everything for their people because he had changed everything for them was arrested, tortured, and then brutally executed. And they knew, that was not just a punishment meant for him. That was a message sent to them. And the message was clear. Enough. Go home. Go back to your small lives. Stop rocking the boat.

This is state sponsored terrorism, and the Roman Empire had it down to a fine art.

So yes, they had much to fear. And in today's gospel reading, Jesus comes among them and says, "peace be with you." That's the first things he says. They are afraid and he says, "peace." and then he does a funny thing. He blows on them and says, "receive the Holy Spirit." In this time of great fear and darkness, before the dawn as broken upon them, he comes to them and offers them something to address their fear.

What is your relationship with fear like? You know when I first told people I was moving to Surrey over 6 years ago, there was something of a fear reaction. I am sure you have had it too. "Ooooo Surrey! That's a scary place." And yes, there have been a higher number of shootings in our neighborhoods in the last month. There is a reasonable fear reaction to these events. Fear is a good and helpful human response to danger- bred in the bone- good for our survival.

However, when fear becomes generalized, when it becomes a habit, or when immediate danger goes on too long, it starts to bend us out of shape. Post-traumatic stress is a kind of habituated fear that lives beneath the surface that can be debilitating. Though it originally comes from real stimulus, if you don't deal with it, it becomes a way of life- it can take on a life of its own. That is the kind of fear that Jesus addresses with "peace be with you."

If you continue to follow the stories of the disciples beyond this one, you will notice a huge shift that takes place and at the core of it is how they approach fear. Clearly the peace that Jesus offered them, over time, began to sink in, and they moved out from that darkened room where they were huddled, and moved into the world, into life. And they did so with courage,. They reshape their community, just like it says in Acts. But I believe this didn't happen overnight. I believe it took time for the peace to sink in, for them to realize that they didn't have to look at the Roman dominated world as completely threatening, that the cross did not have to be a threat, that fear didn't have to govern their life, but that beyond the fear, there is a world and a life that was calling to them. Rome wanted them to be crucifixion people, but they were called to be resurrection people- Easter people.

Last week I recommended a delightful and serious movie, *The Visitor*. I hope you get a chance to watch it. This week I have another movie to recommend, and I am anticipating a little eye rolling with this one. I know that when Trenea first recommended it to me, there was a little eye rolling. But seriously folks, you've got to see "*The Croods*." *The Croods* is an animated kids movie about a family of cave dwellers early in human history. They have all the stereotypical primitive characteristics of cave dwellers: slanted forehead, not too bright, hunter/gatherer types, and there is some humour made of all that. They are also a family with the stereotypic slow and kind of idiotic father, and the angsty teen. But the part I think has some real juice to it, is their relationship with the world and with fear.

This family has a motto that the dad is especially committed to, "fear keeps us alive. Never not be afraid." And in fact, the world has its threats. There are beasts out there that actually do want to eat you for lunch. And the night is particularly frightening. So a healthy fear of imminent threat is a good thing. But the Dad has taken it to an extreme and the teen is rebelling.

I'll let you see the whole film for yourself, but there are two scenes that I especially like. The daughter sneaks out one night because she wants to experience the world. The father discovers she's gone, and rolls the stone back from the cave entrance to go find her. There is this long chase scene where a sabre tooth cat tries to kill them and they barely make it back. The father is lecturing the daughter about not taking risks like that. And he trots out the mantra: fear keeps us alive. Never not be afraid. And she says, "what's the point of all this. I mean what are we doing all this for." In her there is a desire for life, not just for survival. It needs to have a purpose. It needs to mean something. And she is actually willing to take some risks in order to not just survive in a cave, but live in the world.

Eventually she sneaks out and meets a person who has fire. They have never seen fire before. Now, he is a young, handsome, charming guy. But he has fire! And it is magical and amazing. She returns with stars in her eyes, not just about the boy but about the world she has discovered which is still dangerous and threatening and all that... But there is fire out there!

The thing is, the father is right. The world is a place where you need to be careful to survive. You need to be smart and plan, and it is good to have a cave to crawl into when you need it. But you can't live there forever. The daughter is also right. There has to be more. The world is also beautiful, and amazing, and survival is not enough.

It is especially not enough for Easter people- people of the resurrection. And it really matters that we decide how we are going to look at the world- whether we will approach it in fear as if the world were essentially a sabre toothed cat, or whether we will approach it in hope, as if the world were essentially a friendly place, a place where God lives, a place with fire.

Albert Einstein once wrote: "I think the most important question facing humanity is, 'Is the universe a friendly place?'" This is the first and most basic question all people must answer for themselves.

"For if we decide that the universe is an unfriendly place, then we will use our technology, our scientific discoveries and our natural resources to achieve safety and power by creating bigger walls to keep out the unfriendliness and bigger weapons to destroy all that which is unfriendly and I believe that we are getting to a place where technology is powerful enough that we may either completely isolate or destroy ourselves as well in this process.

"If we decide that the universe is neither friendly nor unfriendly and that God is essentially 'playing dice with the universe', then we are simply victims to the random toss of the dice and our lives have no real purpose or meaning.

"But if we decide that the universe is a friendly place, then we will use our technology, our scientific discoveries and our natural resources to create tools and models for understanding that universe. Because power and safety will come through understanding its workings and its motives."

"God does not play dice with the universe,"

Exactly! God does not play dice with the universe, and we are an Easter people. For an Easter people, fear will not do. Fear will not lead us into life. Fear is no basis upon which to build a life, a community, a nation, or a future. No. We are an Easter people. Hope is what we choose. Life is what motivates us. Abundant life. We move out of our caves in hope, trusting that the universe is a friendly place, not because there is no danger or threat, but because the God who raised Jesus from the dead is alive in the world. So we move out in hope. There's fire out there. Amen.