

“Fear/No Fear—and a Brief History of Hell”
July 16, 2023

Deuteronomy 10:12-15
Matthew 10:24-31

As I said, I’ll be preaching from the Gospel of Matthew on many of these summer Sundays. There’s much to learn here, as Jesus reminds us when he says that no student ranks above the teacher, no servant above the master.

And, please, stay with me! It gets better, but the short section of Matthew’s Gospel—Matthew’s *good* news—that we heard this morning is generally *not* what we *want* to hear on a beautiful summer day.

And yet these words might be just what we *need* to hear.

So let us take courage together and jump into the deep end of the Gospel.

And let’s start with that troubling warning at the center of this morning’s text: “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”

If you’ve read Matthew’s Gospel before—or if you’ve been listening over the years on Sunday mornings—this is not what you would expect.

What *would be* expected is a strong call to courage in the face of distressing situations. Throughout the Gospel of Matthew, we hear a call to bravery in following the way of Jesus Christ.

Again and again the clear message is: “Do not fear.”

At the beginning of Matthew, when Joseph learns that Mary, his betrothed, is pregnant, he is told, “Do not be afraid.”

At the end of Matthew, when Mary Magdalene watches in amazement as the stone is rolled away from the entrance to the empty tomb, she is told: “Do not be afraid.”

And even right here at the center of the story, as Jesus sends his disciples to proclaim the good news that the realm of heaven is drawing near, after he warns them of the opposition they will face from religious leaders, from the government, and even from their families; he tells them directly: “Have no fear.”

This message has strengthened feeble hearts and enabled timid people to do great things for two thousand years. In Martin Luther’s hymn the Reformers sang: “And though this world with devils filled, should threaten to undo us, We will not fear...” In faith, the Civil Rights activists of the 60’s sang: “I ain’t scared of your jail, ‘cause I want my freedom...”

“Do not fear.”

Perhaps those words have given you the support you needed at difficult times in your life. I hope so.

But now we hear something unexpected. As soon as those words are out his mouth, without pausing for a breath, Jesus continues: “Rather, *fear the One* who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”

Jesus is talking about God here. And, as is often the case, the words of Jesus trouble us.

We hear the word “hell” and our minds start working overtime. Medieval pictures of eternally burning fires inform our thinking and our imagination—but this is not what we find in scripture.

The Greek word that our Bibles translate as “hell” is “Gehenna.” This was the name, not for some underground, after-life destination, but for the fiery trash heap outside of Jerusalem. It was on the southwest side of the city. Even today, if you visit Jerusalem, you can look out over the valley there that is called *Ge Hinnom*.

Jesus exaggerates. The danger is that we will take his exaggerations literally. Later images come to mind and we miss the real message. Jesus speaks, as he usually does, not of some future “there and then” but of the “here and now” of a smoldering garbage dump that anyone could see.

Jesus announces that the realm of heaven is drawing near on earth through his ministry. He sends his followers out to be signs that God is restoring the earth, bringing about a new creation. At the same time, an opposite trajectory is also possible: Imperial Rome—with the brutal power and insatiable greed of all great nations—threatens to turn all of Jerusalem and all of Israel into a smoldering desolation. The message of Jesus is not about burning in some future life; it is a call to live in ways in *this life* so that instead of the destruction of empire the peace of God’s realm might be established.

And that is still our call today—by our actions to avoid the hell, the destruction that is always a human option; by our actions to be signs that the realm of God is near.

This smoldering planet shows us that the work required is great.

Our state legislature, that quickly acted this past week to burn women’s rights to health care, shows us that there is still much to do.

In a section of chapter 10 of Matthew that I did not read this morning, Jesus tells his followers that the cost of discipleship could be high. The religious leaders will persecute them. The government will seek to take their lives. Their own family members will betray them.

Be afraid, Jesus says.

Be afraid, not of the religious authorities, not of the political powers, not of your families.

Fear the God in whom you live and move and have your being. Fear the God whose realm of peace and mercy is coming and will not be thwarted.

By the time of Jesus, it was a long-accepted truth: the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom.

For us today, talk of the “fear of God” takes us aback as much as talk of “hell,” doesn’t it? The fear of God and threats of hell belong in other churches, certainly not in such enlightened and sophisticated places as the Congregational United Church of Christ.

“Fear God,” we hear. And we imagine ourselves cowering in the corner. I had a philosophy professor in college who brought on just that response. Graduate students as well as we lowly undergraduates longed to get the choice seat in the classroom—behind a potted palm where we might not be noticed and therefore might not be called on. Oh, it wasn’t the fear of God that was provoked in his seminar on Aristotle, but it was fear—fear of coming up short, fear of not being ready, fear of judgment.

Maybe you were raised in a way that emphasized the “fear of God” and such talk has done great damage to your spirit. Maybe through seeking and prayer and study and action you have been able to discover a God that does not cause fear. If that is the case, you might wish that I had avoided this text from Matthew.

Or maybe fearing God is so unthinkable to you that these words of Jesus sound as nonsense.

The “fear of God” which is the beginning of wisdom is not meant to keep us cowering in the corner, hiding from our Creator. Nor is that the intent of Jesus.

We do better to understand “fear” as a sense of awe and wonder in the presence of the Sovereign God who relativizes all human wisdom and all human activity. This God is the mystery who keeps our whole being—body and soul is how Jesus put it—in God’s eternal care.

When we understand what it means to fear God, we do not run away, but we come before God as we are, trusting in God’s goodness and mercy. In awe and wonder, we recognize that our ways are not God’s ways and we seek as much as is possible to live in God’s ways of love and mercy, of kindness and compassion. Wisdom begins when we recognize both who we are and who God is and no longer confuse the two.

Awe and wonder mark the fear that is the beginning of wisdom. If the God we fear is the One who keeps us—both body and soul—from death, then we have true wisdom, the ability to use our knowledge toward good and life-giving ends.

And let me suggest that that while the fear of God is the *beginning* of wisdom, it is only the beginning. The God who can destroy both body and soul is also the God who has counted even the hairs on our head; this is also the God who while caring for the birds of the air values our frail and fallible human lives much more.

Cowering fear vanishes like the morning mist in the presence of the God of compassion. As we grow in wisdom, we grow as well in the awareness that God is indeed the love that we had hoped God would be.

As we grow in wisdom, we hear the good news spoken as early as those words of Moses: “What does God ask of you? Only this: to fear the Lord your God, to conform to all God’s ways, to love God, and to serve God with all your heart and soul.”

God asks of us only what we are able to do. Live in wonder before God. Follow in God's ways. Love. Serve God in all that you do with all that you are.

You can do that.

In this time of rebuilding, it is important to consider the foundation on which we build. It's been said of this congregation that we are a "serious" church and that "What might be called the seriousness of the church arises from a belief that Christianity is demanding and a desire to understand its demands and to be encouraged and supported in responding to them."

We are a congregation that does not shy away from demands, a congregation that seeks to know what God asks of us. A liberal, open-hearted Christianity calls to the best in us as individuals and as a congregation.

Christianity is demanding.

With heart and soul we respond to

the demand to be wise stewards of our wealth and our abilities

the demand to stand with those who are oppressed or pushed to the margins,

the demand to be peacemakers in a world of violence,

the demand to speak the truth in a world that favors lies,

the demand to care for creation,

the demand to be a congregation that welcomes all people.

You can do that.

Do not be afraid.