

"Fear and New Life"  
Mark 13:1-8  
November 18, 2018  
York Center Church of the Brethren  
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Jesus and his disciples were preparing to leave the Temple- for the last time. A few days earlier Jesus had entered the holy city of Jerusalem to much fanfare by the people- a red carpet made of coats, waving palm branches, they welcomed him as their king. He had spent most of his time since in the temple- teaching and debating with the religious leaders who did not call him king. They were, in fact, plotting his death.

As Jesus and the group left the Temple one of the disciples looked up and marveled at the architectural magnificence of the Temple. And it was amazing- massive, spectacular. It was one of the wonders of the ancient world- twice the size of the Roman Forum. An archeological excavation in recent years uncovered a stone from the Temple wall. It is 40 feet long, 10 feet high, and 14 feet wide.

It is estimated to weigh 500 tons. That sounds indestructible, doesn't it?

But Jesus says, "You're impressed with this? Not one of these huge stones will be left in place. They will all end up in a pile of rubble." And forty years later, they did when the Romans overran Jerusalem and burned the Temple to the ground. Not one of the massive stones was left standing.

Jesus and his disciples soon were sitting on the Mount of Olives with a panoramic view of the grand Temple complex. I imagine it was hard for the disciples to think that the massive buildings could ever be destroyed and there was the matter of it being the home of God on earth. So, of course they asked Jesus the same thing we would ask. "*When is this going to happen? How will we know, what signs should we watch for?*"

Jesus said, "*Watch out for doomsday deceivers. Many leaders are going to show up with forged identities claiming, 'I'm the One.' They will deceive a lot of people. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, keep your head and **don't panic**. This is routine history, and no sign of the end. Nation will fight nation and ruler will fight ruler, over and over. Earth-quakes will occur in various places. There will be famines. But these things are nothing compared to what's coming.*" (THE MESSAGE)

Jesus said, "Don't panic. Don't be afraid. Don't be alarmed." And so, of course, for centuries now what have Christians done? They have panicked, been afraid, and

sounded the alarm. We are living in a culture of fear- in our world, in our nation, and in the church. Politicians have risen to power by spewing a threat-based political ideology. Church leaders have circled the wagons and started writing the church's obituary.

Author Marilyn Robinson wrote, *"No one seems to have an unkind word to say about fear these days, unchristian as it surely is."*

You wouldn't know it by watching any number of TV "preachers" and pundits, but fear is not one of the gifts of the Spirit we are to cultivate.

Peter Marty writes, *"I recognize that fear is a terrific uniter. It holds people together like no other ideology, national symbol, or cultural creed. But subscribing to every fear and conspiratorial threat is a strange way to carve out a Christian life."*

German theologian, pastor, and prisoner of Hitler's regime, Dietrich Bonhoeffer once preached of the spiritual damage fear creates. *"It crouches in people's hearts and it hollows out their insides... and secretly gnaws and eats away at all the ties that bind a person to God and to others."*

If you make people afraid, they will hate anyone you tell them to hate, and they will believe almost anything. But we, as followers of Jesus Christ do not have permission to live fearful lives.

Mark wrote his Gospel for people who were living in a fearful and dangerous time. Though they lived some distance from Jerusalem, possibly in northern Galilee, they were very much affected by the war between the Romans and the Jewish rebels. Mark didn't write this passage so that people in 2018 could parse every word to find the exact date of Jesus's Second Coming- as some do. He wrote it for people he knew- flesh and blood people who were suffering and struggling to make sense of their world as it fell apart before their eyes.

It wasn't written from a crystal ball but just from looking around at what people were facing everyday- the violence of war, the impending destruction of the indestructible Temple, the perilous existence of the church under persecution, the enticing voices of false prophets and false messiahs. Mark wrote about what his people knew and experienced every day. This was their reality so he put their concerns in the mouths of the disciples so they could find comfort in the belief that Jesus had already anticipated this and was offering words of encouragement to them. But instead of focusing its energies on Jesus's words, "Don't panic," some

Christian communities have panicked. They have built their bunkers, stocked up on survival gear, and locked their doors to all outsiders.

Jesus called his disciples and he calls us **not** to live in a state of anxiety- but to be ready all the time- always anticipating the activity of God. We are called to live in joy and confidence. Why do we focus on the negative when God promises the good stuff? We are called to live **now**, allowing the promises of God about the future to infuse our every present moment. When you live looking for the activity of God here and now you begin to see it. Many await the Second Coming of Jesus because they want others to be judged and punished. They want to sail away to their heavenly reward. But they are mistaken because the Beloved Community of God isn't up there somewhere—it is down here- right here where we live. The coming "kingdom" of God is already here- and we will only see it when we start acting like Jesus did. And Jesus was about the least afraid person who ever lived.

Focusing our time and energy on fear means that we won't focus on the important things- the moments of grace and mercy that are all around us. When we are distracted by fear we miss the invitation to participate in God's Beloved Community which is right in front of us. For example, when Christians buy into the culture wars claim that there is a "war on Christmas," we spend our time defending something that doesn't need to be defended; our energy goes into ferreting out the enemies of Christmas rather than reaching out to God's children and creating God's Beloved Community in Jesus's name. If we focus only on the ugly, we will miss the beauty. And baby Jesus is doing just fine!

Now, Jesus didn't call us to be ignorant or to ignore evil. We are called to stand up to the forces that harm others. We are called to look at the world with open eyes so that we can respond in a Christ-like manner. The church is called to be fearless and faithful; countercultural, transcendent, impatient, hopeful, and justice seeking. We are not supposed to be satisfied with the way things are until they are as God created them to be. But if we live in fear we have neither the wisdom nor the courage to answer Christ's call to transform ourselves and the world.

We live in confusing and uncertain times. Things we thought were certain are a bit shaky right now. Maybe you are like me, and have days when you feel hopeless and afraid. But that is a luxury we cannot afford right now. The world cannot afford for us to wallow in fear.

- Too many people are in need of the gospel of hope.
- Too many people are starving to death for food and for grace.
- Too many people are learning to hate instead of learning to cooperate.
- Too many people are in need of the good news of God's justice.

The church has important work to do but instead we

sit in our pews paralyzed by fear, surrounded only by people who look, and act, and speak as we do. We whine because "we as a church, aren't big enough, rich enough, smart enough, religious enough." And God says, "ENOUGH! You are enough!"

Being a Christian doesn't mean we won't have moments of fear, doubt, and uncertainty. Of course we will. But we also have the promise that we walk with the One who broke the bonds of death. We walk with the community of believers who have chosen the way of the living Christ over the way of fear and death. The antidote to fear is faith in the One who created you and loves you as though you are the only one to love.

You can't fight fear with fear.

Robust Hope is what ultimately destroys fear.

On November 9<sup>th</sup>, Rabbi Mychal Copeland, leader of a Jewish congregation in San Francisco wrote of her synagogue's first Shabbat service after the massacre at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. Their building is visibly Jewish with Hebrew letters on the outside. It was founded by and for the LGBTQI community so they have long had concerns about being the target of hate. They share space with the First Mennonite Church of San Francisco. The Mennonite Pastor told the Rabbi that a group of Mennonites would pray and sing outside their doors during that first service, holding a vigil of protection for them as they gathered to worship and mourn.

Hundreds of people gathered for the Shabbat service. And outside stood a group of Mennonites singing hymns and holding candles. During the silent prayers the Rabbi asked the congregation to listen to the soft voices outside the open windows and, she wrote, *"I encouraged them to feel how we were held in embrace by our Mennonite neighbors."*

Her chief hope since the shooting is that they will refuse to live in fear. She acknowledges that there are legitimate reasons to be scared. But the key is that even when there is cause to be afraid, they refuse to be overcome by it. She promised that her community will continue to fight systemic anti-Semitism, White Supremacy, and racism.

They will continue to fight for the rights of immigrants and asylum seekers. They will continue to work for a world in which no community of faith needs an armed

guard to worship in safety. They will continue to address the deadly combination of hate and easy access to weapons.

Addressing the criticism that if the Tree of Life building had had an armed guard, then no one would have died, Rabbi Mychal wrote, *"In the short term, I'll take 20 Mennonites over one armed security guard any day."* (1)

May it be so.

Amen.