

Fear not: Baptism and Community Matthew 3:13-16 1/8/2017
with thanksgiving for Nadia Boltz-Weber and her 1/1/2017 sermon, "Fear Vs. Love: A Sermon about Two different kinds of Men"

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2017/01/fear-vs-love-sermon-2-different-kinds-men/>

Prayer: Draw us into your love, Christ Jesus, and deliver us from fear.

This past week I read a sermon titled, "Fear Vs. Love: A Sermon about Two Different Kinds of Men" by Nadia Boltz-Weber. I posted it on St. Luke's Facebook page so you can read it or listen to it. I'm grateful for her faith, wisdom, and words which I've relied on for this message.

This month we are talking about fear, and specifically, God's message throughout the bible to set fear aside. To be not afraid. To choose love. I brought my 2017 coffee mug, "Fear Not!" as a visual reminder to the numerous times in the bible that God tells us to not be afraid.

In the month of December alone, every week an angel messenger of God tells someone - Mary, Joseph, shepherds, to "Fear Not!" I wonder if God uses every December to get us ready for a new year, when it seems as though there is so much to fear. In the news only the last few days, the headlines are full of things to terrify us. To move away from fear, we first need to be aware of what makes us shake in our shoes. Work with me for a moment — how would you finish this sentence: I am afraid of ...
(write down ...)

This is easier said than done so to give us a starting point, we are focusing on four steps to love instead of fear. Last week we talked about staying awake - learning to recognize those among us who live and lead from fear (think King Herod) and those who are heart people - who live and lead from courage that is rooted in love (think the magi.) Today our focus is on community; specifically the community of faith created through baptism.

The second Sunday in January focuses on Jesus' baptism. The intention is for us to think about our own baptism and how this sacrament informs our daily lives. My guess is that if I were to ask, "Who thinks about your baptism every day?" few of us would raise our hands. However, if I asked, "Who thinks about God, prays, reads scripture? Who considers what the next right thing is because of our faith?" then probably most of us would nod our heads. Living from a place of faith, making decisions and taking actions based on God's call to love our neighbors and our enemies, this is living out our baptism. Baptism creates a community of people who seek to follow God named Jesus. Baptism is an outward and visible sign (the water) of an inward and spiritual grace (God's presence as the Holy Spirit within us). When we remember our baptism as we'll do later in worship, we are remembering that the water on our forehead is still there - like a watermark - reminding us that we are part of God's community - and taking the opportunity to again say yes to God's love as the defining and clarifying center of our lives. And, to take this opportunity to look around, and remember again that when love is too hard, we don't have to go it alone. When the fear becomes too tempting, too loud, too strong, too much, remember baptism - you are not alone. You are a beloved child of God and part of God's beloved community. You belong to God, you belong to one another, you belong to all the people and all the creatures of this God-filled creation. When we remember that we belong, when we can feel in our being that we are beloved, we can choose the next faithful step in love and away from fear.

Honestly, it's getting harder for me to turn away from fear. Look at the list of things that scare us. Sometimes I would like to say to the angel messengers that "fear not" isn't as easy as they make it sound! In her sermon, Nadia makes what for me is a game changer as to how to try to live without fear. She writes that maybe God's words aren't a directive, or a piece of advice. In our self-help culture, we have to keep reminding ourselves that the bible isn't a self-help book. Maybe God understands that we can't will ourselves to stopping being afraid, that we can't just grit our teeth, clench our hands (all physical expressions of fear and anxiety) and try harder. Maybe, be not afraid comes to us as a gift from

the One who really isn't afraid. From the One who faces death with the words, "Forgive them..." In his first letter, John writes that "Perfect love casts out fear." The only truly perfect love I know is God. In that same letter, John writes that those who live in God live in love for God is Love. Maybe God's love is so beautiful and powerful that it can do what we can't. Maybe it's God's love in us, with us, around us, that casts out the fear.

But why is fear the first thing to go? Couldn't God's perfect love start by weeding out some of the seven deadlies? How about anger? If God's love would cast out wrath, could we love more and fear less? How about greed? It would sure help the earth if Christians consumed less. Why doesn't God cast out greed first and then tackle fear? Or how about sexism? racism? random acts of violence? Why Does God look at all the sin in our lives and the world, and put the bull's eye on fear? I've puzzled over this and here is what I think, at least this week. I think that God's perfect love casts out fear first because fear is the fuel for all the rest of the sin. Is wrath, that hot horrible rage that takes over our minds and bodies and suddenly we're yelling or hitting or other terrible things, is this rage caused by fear? In J.D. Vance's book, Hillbilly Elegy, he writes that he experiences this kind of rage when he felt his honor was being questioned. (p. 246) If he feared he would lose his honor through an insult or being cut off by a driver on the road, the wrath went from zero to 100 in a nanosecond. Greed is at least in part fueled by fear - of not having enough. Sexism, racism - a whole lot of fear emboldens these demons - fear of losing power and influence, fear of being replaced, fear of a person Christians decide to call "other" or "stranger" instead of neighbor and beloved child of God.

Fear makes Christians small and isolated. It turns Christians into bullies and gossips. In summary, fear destroys community, occasionally all at once like a shooting. But more often, fear destroys community far more slowly, one lie, one cruel word, one silence at a time.

How great is God that God knows all this, and so gives us love, freely gives us love so powerful, so beautiful, so big and bold that it casts out fear. As God's love gets bigger within us, the fear gets smaller, and smaller until finally, one day, we our first response is from love. As God's love pushes out fear, our MO is reset as love. J.D. Vance writes that now when a motorist makes a rude gesture at him at a stop light, and he finds himself ready to fight, unbuckling his seatbelt and opening his car door, he stops, and closes the door, and puts on his seatbelt. A little more love and a little less fear.

So how do we fill up with God's love? We're going to spend the month of February talking about this. Today, here is a prayer response that has helped me more than anything to allow myself to be filled with God's love and for God's love within me to reduce the hold that fear has on me. I learned this from the Shane Claiborne Book of Common Prayer for ordinary radicals. It goes like this.

Draw us into your love, Christ Jesus, and deliver us from fear.

When I start to get angry, I try to pause and pray, "Draw us into your love, Christ Jesus, and deliver us from fear." When I start to feel mean and think insulting things, I am learning to stop and pray, "Draw us into your love, Christ Jesus, and deliver us from fear."

This is a first and necessary step to God's love casting out our fear.

(In conclusion Pray through the fear list with the Response.)