

Happy Easter!

Truth be told, this sermon is *not* where I wanted to go today, but I'm feeling pulled this direction and no matter how hard I've tried not to go down this path, I keep finding myself here. If I'm real honest, I was planning on giving y'all a light sermon today. I was gonna tell y'all a funny story about my hillbilly family, a fancy cookbook, and a possum named Polly. But, we're gonna set Polly aside and go down this other path together.

"It was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews." Christians for millennia have used the very real fear the disciples felt as an excuse to get their revenge on the Jewish people. In other words, if you imagine Rome had nothing to do with the crucifixion, then blame it all on the Jews, that's more or less how we get anti-semitism.

But let's back up. It made perfect sense for the Disciples to hide. As our story tells it, the leaders of the synagogue had it out for Jesus from very early on. They regularly tried to trip him up in public and eventually, it got so bad that they convinced the Romans to arrest him on charges of treason. It was the Romans that killed Jesus, but they wouldn't have done it (at least not then) without nudging from the religious leaders. No wonder the Disciples are afraid. Rome had a knack not just for killing rabble rousers but also for killing the rabble associated with 'em. Problem for the Romans was they couldn't pick any of his followers out of a line up. But the Jewish leaders could. And if they were found, well, they'd seen what would happen. For what it's worth, we should also remember that, outside of the Romans, the Jewish authorities held quite a bit of power, while the Disciples held none. It's no wonder they were hiding out of fear of them. Fear is a funny thing. It makes us do things we may not really mean. Or sometimes, it makes us do things we REALLY mean, and that's often worse. Responding from a place of fear leads us to some mighty scary places. Anti-semitism is based on fear and hatred that comes from that fear. Think of the line we heard from the mouths of tiki torch wielders a few years back, "Jews will not replace us." While they thought they were speaking from a place of strength, what the world heard was "We're afraid we'll be replaced." Once the fear's out there, it spreads, and things get nasty. But people do it anyway. And they often think they're justified, the rest of the world be damned.

Side bar, do you remember the way to tell true prophets from false prophets? "You will know them by their fruits." Reminds me of an old camp song we used to sing with some poetic license from earlier in John's Gospel: "You will know we are Christians by our love." Ours is a religion of Love, not hate, and not fear.

I want to go back to that first line of the Gospel: "the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews." There's always an elephant in the room when this comes up. No, we aren't talking about modern Jewish people. This is not an instructional verse telling us who to fear now. Problem is, our language hasn't changed all that much to differentiate them back then from them right now. To solve that problem, some refer to the ancient authorities as "Judeans" and the modern folks as "Jews." While our brains can do the work of making that distinction, we can't help but hear, at the very least, an echo across time. But if we're hearing "for fear of the Judeans" in terms of our neighbors or lovely friends we've spent long evenings with, it's absurd to make that connection. How could I possibly fear some of the dearest people I've ever known? I'd much rather enjoy their company.

But, there's an image in my mind that has nothing to do with my Jewish neighbors. This year, for maybe the first time in my entire preaching life, I'm imagining a modern "fear of the Jews" that does make sense, kinda. I'm imagining a family in Gaza huddled in a bomb shelter -- if any of those remain -- huddled and shaking behind doors locked for fear of Israeli bombardment. We all know there is a difference between

Judaism and the Jewish people and the Israeli government. It's a linguistic oddity that the one word "Jewish" can mean both. So I need you all to understand that when I'm talking about this modern "fear of the Jews," I'm talking about the Israeli government and the ones that do their bidding, not the Jewish people more broadly. Put differently, I don't want to see the end of the Jewish people; I do want to see the end of the genocidal actions of the Israeli government. Just like the Disciples, Judaism has experienced considerably more than their fair share of violence and trauma. That may be the understatement of the millennium. But while trauma wants to beget more trauma, it does not excuse what Israel has leveled against the people of Gaza.

And it breaks my heart seeing anyone live in fear, especially when that fear is justified. And let's be clear, some fears aren't. The fear that Jews will replace us is made up, drummed up by propagandists to stir up trouble. The fear the Disciples had was real. The fear medieval Christians had of Jews stealing sacrificial Christian babies was not real. The fear Gazans have of the Israeli government now is very, very real. Context matters, and context is not universal. Which is to say, what the Gazans are experiencing in relation to the Israelis now is not indicative of how we should treat Jewish people. And because context matters, we can use our position from outside to see more clearly. And y'all, fear's not limited to Gaza. Much of Ukraine is huddled for fear of the Russian government. Those of you who've spent time with the Dyshko family heard stories of fear, violence, anger, and a heroic determination to flee to safety. They told us that busloads of people trying to escape were regularly bombed, and they knew they'd soon be on just such a bus, active targets in vulnerable, indefensible plain sight. Something similar happened to the Gazans when Israel announced they'd be bombing a city and told people to evacuate along a specific route, a route which they then bombed, slaughtering civilians that trusted them while fleeing for their lives. Now Mexico and Ecuador are getting tense. Yemen is boiling. Iran and Saudi Arabia loom. China's erasure of the Uyghur people continues. The US feels like we're tearing ourselves apart. Seems like the whole world's living in fear. Some real, some manufactured. But it all ends up the same.

I want to be abundantly clear, if I haven't been clear enough already. This isn't about the Jews. This isn't a Jewish problem. This is a human problem. This is about power and the condemnation of those who wield it to breed violence and fear. And y'all, we're not off the hook either. The list of people that huddle together for fear of the Christians is long. Trans kids can barely use the bathroom at school, hungry kids can't be sure they'll have food to eat, otherwise quote-unquote normal kids that don't believe in God can't dream of running for public office (I mean, they *can*, but it's a long shot). Actually, I need to correct myself. See, I've gone and done what so many fearmongers before me have done. I've gone and made you think of the children, which is a powerful tool for manipulation. You may be able to overcome your own fear and give voice to the better angels of your nature, but can you overcome your fear for your or your neighbor's child so easily? "Think of the children" is a great way to make people live in fear of any target you like. And fear of anyone very quickly turns into fear of everyone. Fear stockpiles weapons and MREs and begets more fear until we're all living on a hair trigger waiting for an excuse to work out our fear on a weaker target, and we'll only know we're done when there's no more of them left to be afraid of.

And it's there, right there in this whole cycle, interrupting everything, Jesus emerges through the wall of our locked palace of fear and holds us close. The first words out of his mouth halt the spiraling cycle. "Peace be with you." Peace. Not anger, not vengeance, not fear. Peace. In the face of Christ's peace, fear evaporates and joy takes its place among his followers again. Now, I don't know if Thomas wasn't there because he wasn't afraid or if he was out and about in spite of his fear, but when he finally sees Jesus himself, when Jesus looks him square in the eye, he needs to be reassured that everything's going to be okay. He needs permission for his fear to evaporate, too. And Jesus says, "Peace be with you."

I don't know if the whole world needs more Christians (I mean, we'll take 'em) but I'm certain the whole world needs peace, a peace like Jesus brings. We need someone to put an end to all this terror, to all these abuses of power and manipulation, to all the reasons people huddle in fear. I don't know what that looks like, but I know we can try. I know we have to try. It's gotta start with examining the narratives that bring us fear or worry or concerns over what other people are saying. But it can't start until we agree not to be afraid of whatever may come. It can't start until we begin every encounter with our hands open and our hearts pumping love from the center of our beings to the center of theirs. It can't start until we refuse to let fear and anger and revenge rule us. But Peace can be with us.

Peace doesn't just mean no war, though that's a mighty fine result. Peace resides in our souls, too, and my God do we need Peace there. Peace that frees kids to use whatever bathroom they want. Peace that frees kids to trust the next meal will come. Peace that makes room for kids to live alongside and have the same opportunities as me. Put differently, a peace that passes understanding. How can you tell a real prophet from a false one? You will know them by their fruits. And how can you recognize a Christian? You will know them by their love, love that begins with the erasure not of people but the erasure of fear. Love that begins with inclusion. Love that begins with peace. So be not afraid, and peace be with you.