

The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

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Reading Into the Darkness

Psalm 1; 1 John 4.16-21

Russ Dean, September 24, 2006



I was not alive to see it, to live through the most troubling economic time this nation has ever known, and, as I read it and hear the stories, few really “lived” through the Great Depression. The great majority of the nation just survived, subsisting on common faith and uncommon courage, and by a commitment to a work ethic that I pray is not dying with the last of the survivors of that day. The stock market crashed in October of 1929, and it took most of the next decade to restore the country’s stability and confidence. The story of this dramatic restoration can be told in the biography of the man who came to the Presidency in the harsh winter of 1933.

I’m not sure it’s fair to say, even of a President of the United States of America, that he stepped into the limelight on March 4, 1933, so encompassing was the nation’s darkness. Yet there was light on that day, light which one of history’s greatest leaders read “Into the Darkness” of that moment. To a nation gripped in the dread of helplessness, to a nation bound by an understandable and justifiable fear, Franklin Delano Roosevelt spoke some of the most timely and powerful words ever uttered from an American political leader. I read the entirety of his first inaugural address in preparation for this message and was moved by the power of his presentation and the sheer eloquence of his language.¹ To a nation in the thrall of gripping fear, Roosevelt spoke of liberation:

This is preeminently the time to speak the truth, the whole truth, frankly and boldly. Nor need we shrink from honestly facing conditions in our

¹ This was particularly interesting to me, as I noted to the congregation, given last week’s sermon on the “waywardness of our simplicity” (see, “K.I.S.S. – The Cause and Curse of an Immature Culture”).

country today. This great Nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and will prosper. So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.²

Someone has said that “all truth is but half truth,” so I could tell you today that which we know to be true, namely that a certain quality and an unspecified quantity of fear is helpful, even necessary for our survival. But FDR knew that the inevitability and necessity of fear is a message which hardly deserves another single moment of air time. The “fear factor” has always been one of the most frequently used weapons in the arsenal of human motivation, and it has become the context and content of far too many messages in the public arena in recent years, whether sacred or secular.

It is easy to motivate by spreading fear. Almost any mouthpiece with an audience can be trained to repeat well-worn clichés and speak-easy proclamations and to watch concern, if not a down right panic, spread through a listening audience. Such messages can (and do) motivate people to respond (in frightening ways), but people of faith must ask, “Toward what common, healthy, and redemptive end will such fear move us?”

I acknowledge that another kind of message is much more difficult to offer.³ It is so because, as I said last week, life is just not simple, so simple solutions cannot name

² Full copies of the speech are available on numerous internet sites.

³ One of my best critics told me at the door, “the first half of the sermon was great.” The next day I received an email which read, in part: “I felt that that your sermon started off on quite a roll. The questions about the fearful winning a war against the fearless and your thoughts on our need to face our own complicity were brilliant. But then I felt that you kind of wandered off into, well, pabulum. I wanted more than “Fear Not” after you had so ably outlined some of our worst fears. But I do understand the difficulties of taking it much farther (political, ideological, etc.). And anyway, ½ is better than none at all!” Though she is probably at least partly right, I responded that the “second half” is always the most difficult, and one that I am troubled to give. How do I know what you fear? And how many different fears are there in my listening congregation? I felt that giving you a “do this” list would either insult the intelligence of my congregation, or fail to capture the complexity of the situation (all people have different fears). I hope that everyone was not left with the taste of baby food in their mouths!

our fears completely, and simple solutions attack only partial truths, while greater lies often go unaddressed. Such solutions compound our problems. And fears increase.

We are, for example, expending billions of dollars and the lives of many promising citizens, fighting a much proclaimed “War on Terror,” which is, ironically, just another way of saying a “War on Fear.” But whose fear are we fighting? And how do the fearful win a war against the fearless? (I intend those terms to be provocative, for it does seem to me that we are the fearful in this war – just listen to the language we use – and that our so-called enemy is suicidally fearless unto death.) The simple solution that has been proposed, which has now consumed our national and personal life for five years, is that we must fight fire with fire, for, as we are continuously told, “You can’t reason with terrorists.” That is the message of fear.

But what I want to know (and this is not a simple question) is if we have really asked honestly and reflected deeply on the cause of our conflict? Is this a war of ideologies? A war of religions? Or is it a war based on the economic realities that we will continue to face as our globe becomes more crowded, and as our nation consumes more and more its resources? And, regardless how you answer that question, are we willing to ask if we have any complicity? And how might we respond to this complicity, instead of striking out in fear against an enemy, perhaps of our own making? I do not believe this war will ever end until we are willing to ask that question and honestly face the answers. And until we do, our War on Fear will just be a continuing War of Fear, with all its expected side effects.

It is much more difficult to offer a message of substance, of clarity, a message that names the demons which are responsible for our fear. But such a message is vital, for

more than naming our fears, such a message names our help, and speaks to a fear-filled people of the Good News of hope. We must learn to speak such messages which read into the darkness of our fear, the truths we have learned in the light. That when people learn to see one another, to talk to one another, to negotiate their differences, then truly, all things are possible. And we must begin by naming fear, itself, as perhaps the most destructive demon of all. Richard Rohr says this naming begins close to home:

Unless we observe and surrender our small, daily anxieties, we won't recognize the really big fears, in all their disguises, that control our politics, our denominations, our bank accounts, and the world's future.⁴

What do you fear? How rational is such fear? Does your fear motivate you toward redemption, or in retreat from it?

When Amy and I were first married, we were fortunate to live in her paternal grandmother's recently vacated house. It was a small wood-frame home, huddled in a grove of trees up on a dark hill, off A.B. Jacks Road. Somewhere in my psyche, as a new homeowner and husband, I must have also taken on the new role of protector and defender. (This was a tall order for a man who didn't believe in owning a gun and who weighed all of 135 pounds soaking wet!) Apparently I was not too confident of this responsibility, for in the two years we lived at Ma Polly's I was plagued by a series of dreams, each in a different setting, but with the same plot and the same terrifying outcome. In each dream, I was pursued by a gang of evil brigands, and, try as I may, I could not outrun or outwit them to defend myself. I always awoke with a shudder, just as I came to some final dead end and my fate in the hands of the bad guys was made clear. (And it didn't help my confidence in these days any that Amy frequently woke me with a

⁴ Richard Rohr, "fear itself," *Sojourners*, October 2004, p.13.

startle of her own and the whispered question, “Did you hear that?” I’m thinking “Texas Chainsaw Massacre” revisited, but hers was an even worse fear, yet: “...a bug... or, is it a mouse!?”)

The witches of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* put it succinctly: “When our actions do not, our fears do make us traitors...”⁵ Our fears make us traitors of that which we claim to believe, for our fears are a looking glass into our souls. What do you fear? And what does it tell you about what you believe? Failing health? A failing marriage? National calamity? Our children’s future? Our parents’ future? A collapsing economy? Business gone awry? A church budget deficit? Never-ending war? A new viral pandemic? Retirement? College? Marriage? Birth? Death?

Some thought that the post-Enlightenment person would be forever free and rational (says Richard Rohr, again). Yet in many ways, contemporary humanity, even educated humanity, is more fear-based than ever. Education is not the same as transformation. Secular humanity has no one to rely upon. No one to trust. No one to share the burden with. The imperial ego is collapsing under the weight of its smallness and its concomitant fear.⁶

What do you fear? And what does your fear betray in you?

As individuals, we face many challenges, in career and health and interpersonal relationships. What will we read into the darkness of our fears? As a church, there are challenges upon us. A budget deficit grows even as we prepare to break ground on a long-anticipated new building, even as we prepare for a conversation regarding our continuing response to the homosexual community in our congregation and beyond. (You will receive a letter this week in regard to a recommendation from our diaconate’s Family Issues Task Force.) What will we read into the darkness of our fears? As a nation, we

⁵ Witches in *Macbeth*, ii.3.

⁶ Richard Rohr, “fear itself,” *Sojourners*, October 2004, p.13.

face many challenges, terrors from without and terrors within. What will we read into the darkness of our fears?

According to the late Percy Ainsworth, we must learn in the light. And just as children learn to grow out of their fear of the dark, we must learn that the truths of the daylight hold true also in the night. Life has taught us that those lessons of our childhood really are true – that sharing is preferable to hoarding; that honesty is the best policy; that your word should be your bond; that playing fair is always the right thing to do. We must read these truths into the darkness of our grown up fears. Life has taught us that most people, regardless the differences we may know, are essentially good human beings and are trustworthy companions along life's journey. We must read this truth into the darkness of personal conflicts and global war, conflicts which seek to exploit our fears of one another. Life has taught us, as people of faith that, come what may, there is always a tomorrow, a tomorrow that God always uses "*to work for good in all things*" (Romans 8.28). We must call on this hope, and read this light into the darkness of today's pain and tomorrow's uncertainty.

The essential lesson of scripture, start to finish, is this: There is more to this life than we can see and touch and taste and measure, and by faith, we learn to call that more "God." God, for those who dare to believe, is that mysterious source of goodness and life, who brings light from darkness, order from chaos, resurrection from death, peace from fear. To *meditate on the law of God day and night* (Psalm 1) is to trust in the truths of life that we learn in the light, and to trust that these truths, and these truths alone, do, in fact, bring peace. Extreme times do not call for extreme measures. They call for the steady,

consistent measures of truth, measures that we have learned in the light of day.⁷ And only this truth will bring peace. Personal peace. Community peace. National and international peace.

Jesus said, *I am the light of the world* (John 8.12). He is the light which people of Christian faith must learn to take with us, the truth which we must learn to “Read Into the Darkness” of our greatest fears. So, in a fearful day, let us learn to trust in God and in God’s truth. And let us, who claim the name of the prince of Peace, listen to the angel who announced his birth: “*Fear not! For behold I bring you good tidings of great joy!*” (*Luke 2.10*).

The only thing we have to fear... has been overcome by good tidings of great joy.

May it be so!

⁷ I believe Wendell Berry is responsible for this insight, though I could not locate a specific quotation to this effect. Also, from Willard Learoyd Sperry, “The Desire of Discipline,” in *Sermons Preached at Harvard*, quoted in *The Good Life*, by Peter Gomes, p.157-58: “We are told that in times of crisis and opportunity our conduct is seldom determined by our surface conscious thought. The whole deeper stuff of the mind takes control then. The yield of our accumulated living over the years decides what we shall do at such times.”