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THE CHURCH OF THE ASCENSION
THE CITY AND DIOCESE OF CHICAGO

THE LAST SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY 2020,
being February 23rd

From the 17th Chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel:

“Jesus came and touched them, saying,

‘Get up and do not be afraid.’ ”

+ IN THE NAME OF GOD THE FATHER, GOD THE
SON, AND GOD THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN +

Late, late, last night.....and again, early this
morning, I spoke with your Father, and He told me
to tell you how much He loves you.

It may not always FEEL like you are deeply
loved, but it is always true,

just as the rich meanings of the writings of
Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are not always
clear, but thanks be to God,

at least one of the teachings of the Gospel
appointed for this Last Sunday after The
Epiphany is at once transparent, triumphant, and
true.

Walking down the street...walking into church,
journeying the roads of our lives, it is not always
clear what the man or the woman we see before
us is thinking at that moment,

but,

unless the people you see are extremely unusual, it
is more than likely true that what they were
thinking at the time of your encounter,

or at the very least some time that day, was
motivated by some form of fear.

Indeed there are theorists who suggest that
all human behavior is motivated by either love or
by fear,

and given the array of hostilities that fill and

foul the air today, and listening to the hurtful things

that so many sometimes say,

it is does **not** seem that all have listened to

Christ when He proclaimed that He is the way, and

the truth, and the life.

Those who study such things tell us that we

are born with but two instinctive fears:

the fear of falling, and, the fear of loud noises.

Everything else that we are afraid of is

something that we have LEARNED to fear.

We learned, or we have been taught, to be

afraid of being robbed or run over or laughed at or

left behind,

and somehow, we come to believe that we can

clothe our worlds or fashion our lives with certain

protections, powers or privileges,

which can eliminate our experience of being

torn, tormented, or wrongly touched.

The Gospel lesson from St. Matthew this morning is, of course, the shimmering story that has come to be called The Transfiguration.

Peter, James, and John went with Jesus up a mountain, apart from the other disciples, away from their usual routines,

and the Glory of God was revealed to them in our Lord's face shining like the sun and His clothes becoming a dazzling white.

One can well imagine that Peter, James, and John, as well you and me, and the person sitting next to or near you,

would have had any number of responses to such an event, including yes, shock, awe, wonder, and Matthew says, fear.

They saw the choice of God and they heard the voice of God, and Holy Scripture says they "fell

to the ground and were overcome by fear”.

But “Jesus came, and touched them, saying,

‘Get up and do not be afraid.’ ”

And the very words that Christ spoke to

His Disciples many, many years ago, before His

suffering and death,

are the very words that He speaks to you today,
as YOU suffer, or soon enough, will.

Jesus says, “Get up and do not be afraid”.

Jesus knows that fear is a choice, a learned
response, and that there are those who celebrate
our fears as a means of gaining control over us.

We can be taught to fear bad breath or failing
certain tests, and so purchase certain toothpastes
or some of our time, waste, as though failure was
not an event but defined a person.

We learn or can be taught, to be afraid of so
many things. Depending on one’s gender and plans,

we can be afraid to have a child because the United States has the highest maternal mortality rate in the so called developed world.

We can be afraid that the terrible truth, that every nine seconds, a woman in this country is physically or sexually abused; we can be afraid that this will happen to us or to someone that we love.

We can be afraid of the situation of having more bills than money or that we will go through life without a special someone to call “Honey”.

We can fear that the coronavirus, now also named Covid 19 will evolve from an epidemic to a pandemic, and see encounters with other human beings as something to be dreaded and avoided.

Whatever our fears, whether that homophobia will continue to live or that racism will never die,

Jesus says, “Get up and do not be afraid.”

Jesus knows that fear is an acronym which

stands for false evidence appearing real.

Jesus knows that the love of God will not lead
us where the power of God will not serve us.

Jesus, fully human and fully God, understood in
the most intimate of ways that fear is like being
the victim of a cobra, whose venom can paralyze
movement before it fatally stops breathing.

Fear can stop us from laughing, from loving,
and eventually from fully living because of what
might happen or because of what might happen
again.

The Exodus lesson this morning reminds us that
God said to Moses, “Come up to me on the
mountain and wait there, and I will give you the
tablets of stone, with the law and the
commandment.”

Now while Moses might have been thrilled to

actually hear God speak to him, how could he not
have also been afraid?

Beloved of God, it is **not** that there are not
things that are worth being afraid of, but fear is to
be for us a flashing yellow light of warning, not
a red stoplight of immobility.

We recognize our fears, we seek to learn what
they are teaching us or preparing us for, and
then we go on, trusting God.

We are this morning on the edge of the
Season of Lent, and our love for God and our trust
in God, are to so transfigure our lives,

in Lent and beyond, that we are filled
with the blessed assurance that we can, as St. Paul
wrote the Philippians,

“do all things through Christ who strengthens us.”

God calls us to get up, to rise above our fears,
to recognize that the ground beneath our feet is

holy because Jesus is with us wherever we go.

The great organizer of the 1963 March on Washington, the late Bayard Rustin, said that “to be afraid is to live as though the truth were not true.”

It is not true that God wants you to live in fear.

it is not true that having experienced failure in the past, you are destined to not know success in the future.

It is not true that you are the worst thing you’ve ever done and it is not true that you are not worthy of forgiveness.

Perhaps the Lord allows us some of our fears so as to add a certain quality and care to our lives. Anyone who has ever plunged a spoon into hot soup and then immediately sipped it has likely been burned by not waiting for it to cool.

And having had a confidence betrayed helps the
wise to more carefully select whom next to trust,
rather than to think that none are worth trusting
and so to bear our burdens alone.

The rudder of a ship is a relatively small part
of the vessel, and yet it has the power to
determine its direction.

Our fears are relatively small parts of our lives,
but we can allow them to direct us, or we can be
directed by the love and the faith that we have
found by climbing what seem
the mountains in our lives,
the hills of our busy-ness,
the narrow cliffs of our routines,
the rough places of the fears that have gained
entrance to our hearts.

Annie Johnson Flint wrote:

“GOD HATH NOT PROMISED SKIES ALWAYS
BLUE, FLOWER STREWN PATHWAYS ALL OUR
LIVES THROUGH.

GOD HATH NOT PROMISED WE SHALL NOT
KNOW TOIL AND TEMPTATION, TROUBLE AND
WOE;

HE HATH NOT TOLD US WE SHALL NOT BEAR,
MANY A BURDEN, MANY A CARE.

GOD HATH NOT PROMISED SMOOTH ROADS
AND WIDE, SWIFT EASY TRAVEL NEEDING NO
GUIDE;

BUT GOD HATH PROMISED STRENGTH FOR THE
DAY, REST FOR THE LABOR, LIGHT FOR THE
WAY.

GRACE FOR THE TRIALS, HELP FROM ABOVE,
UNFAILING SYMPATHY, UNDYING LOVE.”

+ IN THE NAME OF GOD THE FATHER, GOD THE
SON, AND GOD THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN +