

“O Come On, What Are You Afraid Of?

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Yesterday, someone asked me, how's your sermon coming, I said well I'm working on Genesis now, they said wow you got a long way to go to get all the way to Revelation. That's true there is a long distance between Genesis and Revelation, the entire Christian Bible as we know it in fact, and in the entire Christian Bible we find stories about dreams. In Genesis, Jacob had a dream, he dreamed of a ladder all the way to Heaven, Did you know that 1/3rd of the Bible relates to visions or dreams? Important people who dreamed were Abraham, Joseph, Daniel, Ezekiel, Joseph (Jesus') father, Mary (Jesus') Mother, Paul, Cornelius and the Disciple John to name a few. What do we know about dreams? We know of famous speeches about dreams like, Martin Luther King Jr. had a dream, many thought he was crazy, and from the great musical LesMiserable' we hear a wonderful song of Dreaming a Dream of freedom, no war and food for the hungry. What about you, what are your dreams like? If you had to describe your dreams to people what would they think?

Last week Rev. Foote began our 8 week series using the text from Revelation, describing Jesus' direction when he spoke to John through a dream. What we have in Revelation is just that, a description captured of John's dream and in this dream Jesus gave John messages for 7 large churches of the day. Last week it was the church of Ephesus and how the church was called to return their first love. The call to them and to us is to

ensure we always return to our love for Christ with the intensity of our first love. How does this tie in to our stewardship? We are to be great stewards of our love for Christ and the church. As a steward we are called to maintain the intensity of that love like it is our very first love. Jesus spoke to John in a dream and directed John to write to the church of Ephesus and remind them of this love they had lost sight of. And here last week we heard the charge for us to renew our feeling of our first love for Christ and the church. A strong and powerful love for the community and people around us for all God's children across the street, across the world, and yes across the aisle from us. So how have you done that this week, have you begun to search for ways in which you can renew that first feeling of love that great love for Christ, this church and community?

The next church in John's dream was the church of Smyrna. Acts 19:10 suggests that the church of Smyrna was founded during Paul's third missionary journey. Smyrna sat 35 miles north of Ephesus, (the city of the church reminded to find once again that first love of the church and Christ) and was built near the ruins of an ancient Greek colony destroyed in the 7th century B.C. Lysimachus, one of Alexander the Great's generals, rebuilt Smyrna as a new Hellenistic city in the 3rd century B.C. The city was later established as a Roman commercial center with a port on the Aegean Sea. Scholars believe the city grew to about 100,000 by the time of the apostles Paul and John.

The letter in Revelation 2:8-11 is filled with the affection and joy that comes from triumph over hardship and persecution. Jesus says I know you, I know your poverty and your riches, I know what will happen to you, just stay with me and in the end you will receive the greatest reward ever. The Christian church faced strong Jewish opposition in Smyrna. Those posing as Jews Jesus alludes to here, those ruling under the guise of Jewish rule and there was a considerable number of Jews in the city from pre-NT times through the Ottoman period.

When John wrote that some will be thrown into prison he knew that Roman imprisonment was frequently a prelude to execution. Some historians say about 10 days prior to execution persons were imprisoned. He encouraged the believers to be faithful even unto death. In this persecution, John's own apprentice, Polycarp, was martyred here in 155 A.D. An example of John's warning and exhortation, he refused to blaspheme the Lord's name and was subsequently burned alive.

So we have a large city, even by today's standards, that was a commercial center and source of great wealth for the government and we have a group of people organizing in a different belief than those that were in power and what does that produce but fear. Fear they are going to take over, fear that what had happened some centuries before, the city was overthrown, these Christians are just another group who might organize and try to overthrow those in power.

Let me stop a minute and ask a question, were people afraid of Martin Luther King Jr.? Were they afraid of the power he had when he organized people. I remember when then Senator Obama was running for office and the fear factor that was raised by many who were against him was he was a community organizer, he will organize and overthrow people, make a change, we have to watch him.

So we have this big church of Smyrna being “watched.” Carol Danner talks about how in her place of employment they must review inmates mail, watch for codes or possible warnings of uprising or illegal events within the prison, they have to read all email coming in to the prison and make sure it is safe for them to receive. The Roman empire was watching over this church, watching for any sign of uprising of taking over and John warned them through Jesus I know what will happen, just stay true to me and do not be afraid. During the civil rights movement th FBI would try to infiltrate the movement meetings to ensure these people weren’t trying to overthrow our government, people get scared when change is happening. And so this church of Smyrna was the same way, they were an active group of new Christians, following Christ’s teachings and Jesus came to John in his dream and described what John wrote a warning and a call for courage.

But what about us? How does this story translate to us? We don’t have fear of being burned at the stake, do we? No one is going to put us in jail or kill us for quietly having a church service are they?

But John writes you may be persecuted for your faith. Is your faith strong enough to handle it?

Maybe we won't be put to death for our faith, but don't you think if we stand up for our beliefs we will be persecuted by some? If we really lived our belief out loud wouldn't it be dangerous. Or is it more dangerous not to live out our faith.

There are many stories I can tell you of fear and holding on in faith, I can tell you about Mahalia Jackson and her rise to be a giant in the Gospel music world, the adversity she overcame in personal illness, child abuse, racial tension, an abusive relationship with a man who demanded she leave Gospel music and how still she became the first Gospel singer to sing at Carnegie Hall and the first Black singer at that, in the 1950s. She put her fears and hurt aside, she sold over 8 million copies of "Move on Up A Little Higher" in 1948 and became one of the top selling Gospel artists ever. She held on and overcame her fears.

I can tell you of women in our congregation and my family that have overcome the fear of breast cancer that have faced illness with a resolve and have faced death with a peace knowing God has a plan for them. It may not always be the plan we have or the ideas we have but we are assured, just as the church of Smyrna is assured that God is with us, be faithful, hold on to your belief and we are promised a crown of life, a joyous life everlasting.

Some of you know the story of this congregation, the waning of members, the loss of money to run the church, and the strength, passion and devotedness of some of the members to keep this congregation alive. There was much fear, some left, some just quit coming to church and some tried hard to hold on, each person had to do what was right for them and their family. Attendance on Sunday morning dropped as low as 30 some Sundays, now it wasn't over persecution or lack of hope, in fact I cannot specifically tell you why, however I can say there seemed to be a lack of a cohesive community focus and fear set in. Fear of closing doors, fear of loss of a place in the community, fear of loss. But members held on, prayed and worked hard for a change and a refocus. Sometimes that is what it takes. And what has happened is wonderful, the church is vibrant and growing, we received a spark and look around you, you are the result of that spark. It is a wonderful thing. However, I have to warn you, don't let fear take over, don't get to a point of complacency, continue to seek that first love of the church, continue to seek the drive to grow and be strong, continue to work toward outreach in the community and the world. Now, it is hard to continue without fear. If our financial status improves we want to just hold on to what we have and not take a chance because if we use that up we may not get more, but where did that recovery come from? Where did our renewal come from? It was from God through the Holy Spirit was it not? Now, I'm not saying don't be smart and be wasteful in fact we are called to be good stewards of all we have, but being good stewards means we are called out not to fear and trust as well.

There are many stories of churches of all sizes who hold on to their members and focus only on those who they know and have been in their church for years. Our church is a nice size, if others come in it will mess up our club. Or churches that don't do much self care for their own members and instead just want to get more people, if we don't get more we wont be a great church, however I believe we are called to do both, to invite new folks in to our small group to grow and expand and to form small groups fellowships to care for each other in rejoicing celebrations and care in hard times. We are called to remove our fears and trust, have faith. Where is your faith, do you keep fear in check with your faith or does fear overcome you and what you are called to do in your faith personally and as a church?

Now, I'm a good one to talk, I know. For it was fear that kept me from saying yes for several years to the ministry. I felt the call, I heard the call, yet how could I make it not having the salary that came with my corporate job? How could I get up and preach, how could I be a pastor? I was afraid I wouldn't have what I needed when someone was dying, when someone needed me to help with a youth group, when I was called upon to pray, I was afraid. My fears were put to rest though when I said ok God, I will come. The words Do not be afraid for I am with you became more meaningful than I can ever explain in those moments.

So, I ask you what are you afraid of church? What is your fear? Fear that God brought us this far and will leave us so now we have to hold on to what

we have with all our might, or do it all by ourselves, or afraid if we live out our faith we will not have the security we need? What is your fear?

We have spoken several times of Rev. Basom as he lay dying he said I know one thing, God is Love. God is love and by God's love all, ALL fear is conquerable. God will not leave us alone, fear will not overtake us, if we are good stewards to hold on to the faith we have deep in our hearts and live our lives in faith. Amen.