

Sunday, February 25, 2012
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – “Fear: The Opposite of Faith”

What do you think it would be like to know everything that was going to happen in your life?

What if you knew now when you would die, or even how you would die?

Would you live differently?

Jesus seems to know exactly what fate awaits him.

He speaks plainly about his impending death, much to the confusion of his followers.

What is particularly striking about Jesus’ knowledge—so much more divine than human, is that he doesn’t seem compelled to change the outcome.

He is not comfortable with the knowledge that he is going to die – he says, “Now my soul is troubled,” but he acknowledges that he must endure what lies ahead and will not ask God to save him.

He knows that just like a grain of wheat must fall into the earth and die to this life, it will be recreated and reborn as new wheat in the next season.

Jesus knows that what lies ahead, beyond the suffering and pain of death – death on a cross – lies resurrection and eternal life with God.

Eternal, according to the dictionary, means “without beginning or end; lasting forever; always existing; perpetual; ceaseless; endless; enduring; immutable; existing outside all relations of time; not subject to change.

Jesus is not afraid of dying because he knows that what awaits him is eternity with God.

This was a new concept for the people listening to Jesus.

In ancient Jewish tradition, there was no belief in an afterlife or life beyond death.

Jesus’ knowledge of eternal life is one of the gifts that he gave to his followers.

He demonstrated that they could let go of their fears, because God was promising eternal life.

In our world today we struggle with this concept because it is beyond our understanding.

We are rational thinkers and we just can’t wrap our heads around the idea of eternity.

It is too big.

But isn’t that what God is?

Isn't God too big to understand; too awesome to comprehend?

How can we possibly define God?

The bible recounts for us stories of individual's encounters with God.

Each book, each chapter introduces us to another person, some like us, some quite different, who experience the mystery and majesty of God in different ways.

When Jesus says, "those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life" I think that he means that if you live this life, your mortal, earthly life in a way that honors God and follows Jesus – you will lose that life when you die.

You will inherit eternal life with God – something much different than this life.

"Eternal is a moment of simultaneity of the human and the divine, a moment in which God and man meet."

However, if you ignore Jesus during your earthly life, and insist on following your own way, making your own rules and living for your own benefit – you will be destined to that selfish life for eternity.

The reward of heaven will not be yours.

One writer pointed out that "eternity is not perpetual future but perpetual presence. God has planted in us the seed of eternal life. The world to come is not only a hereafter but also a here-now."

Jesus knows this so he is not afraid of mortal death.

In our own lives, we are often very afraid of death.

We hesitate to talk about it, acknowledge the possibility or even plan for it.

We spend millions of dollars to stave it off—to prolong our earthly life.

What if we knew, with certainty, that what follows this life is better?

What would be different?

Abraham Joshua Heschel reflected on "Death as Homecoming."

He said, "Life's ultimate meaning remains obscure unless it is reflected upon in the face of death. For both life and death are aspects of a greater mystery, the mystery of being, the mystery of creation. Death then, is not simply man's coming to an end.

It is also entering a beginning."

When Jesus speaks to his followers about what is to come, they simply cannot grasp it.

He again uses the metaphor of light to describe his presence among them. “While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of the light.”

While you have the light – right now, in this world, in this life – present tense.

Believe in the light – start believing, start cultivating your faith, start sharing your love with others.

So that you may become children of the light – you will become what you practice. Light drives out darkness.

When you become, like Jesus, a child of the light, your life will be centered on God – on love. Love drives out fear.

One of our Lenten reflections this past Wednesday described this love beautifully,

This inexhaustible love between the Father and the Son includes and yet transcends all forms of love known to us.

It includes the love of a father and mother, a brother and sister, a husband and wife, a teacher and friend.

But is also goes far beyond the many limited and limiting human experiences of love we know.

It is a caring yet demanding love.

It is a supportive yet severe love.

It is a gentle yet strong love.

It is a love that gives life yet accepts death.

In this divine love Jesus was sent into the world;

to this divine love Jesus offered himself on the cross.

Jesus offered himself on a cross for our benefit.

Jesus died so that we might understand that there is no power greater than love.

This past week I read of a couple in Israel who launched a Facebook page to Iranians saying, “*We will never bomb your country. We love you.*” After receiving hundreds of responses, Michal Tami, one of the initiators said, “Iranians see our page and break down with excitement. They always thought we hated them.”

Love prevails.

Our book discussion group this past week explored Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s doctrine that Christian love is best interpreted as “love of our enemies.”

“By our enemies” Bonhoeffer said, “Jesus means those who are quite intractable and utterly unresponsive to our love, who forgive us nothing when we forgive them all, who requite our love with hatred and our service with derision.”

That is the kind of love that Jesus modeled for us on the cross.

Love that in the face of hatred and violence can seek forgiveness.

Knowing that God loves us empowers us to be a force for love in the world.

This is the force that held Jesus up as he made his way through Jerusalem.

It is this power that carried him through Holy Week to Golgotha.

It is love – extraordinary, unexplainable, awe-inspiring, grace-filled love that opened that tomb on Easter morning.

It is to this love that we pledge ourselves in covenant and communion with God and with one another.