

**Third Sunday After Pentecost
(Saturday-Sunday)
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
20-21 June 2020**

Welcome to our first day of opening after our COVID-19 quarantine. We had two dry-runs this week on Wednesday and Thursday and they both went very well. I pray today's service will go just as well. Now, to start my sermon, let me ask all of you a question. Do you like scary movies. Please raise your hand. Good! I believe what makes a scary movie truly great is the amount of fear it causes on the viewers. Fear is a powerful tool. It can be used to subjugate entire nations, it can ensure the compliance of those under our supervision, it can help the economy sell us things we don't need and often don't really want, etc. Almost every segment of our economy uses fear in one way or another to achieve its goals. And chief among the things we are taught to fear is the fear of death. This is the secret behind every horror movie ever made. From *Black Christmas* to *Halloween*, from *Friday the 13th* to *Psycho*, from *Saw* to *Texas Chainsaw Massacre...* all scary movies build on the same fear: The fear of death.

In every horror movie there is an innocent, likable victim, which is meant to represent you and I. Every movie has a deranged killer who derives pleasure in taking lives and who, for some crazy reason, wants to come after you. This killer acts in random ways that can't be understood or anticipated, and this is exactly the problem. You don't know for sure when and how he will attack. One moment you are watching television or cooking a meal and the next moment the phone rings and a strange voice announces you are next. Before you know it, the lights go out and you feel someone in the room, often revealed by a faint glow of light coming from a street lamp or a ray of lightning. Then begins the running, the screaming, the chasing and the killing. And through it all you are made to believe that this could be you, which in turn, increases your fear. Would you like to tell you a joke about a scary movie? Bubba, Boudreaux, and Thibodeau are out in a scary cemetery and suddenly they see a serial killer with a chainsaw. They run for cover to a nearby farm. Bubba hides among the cows and when the killer comes near, he says, "Moo," and the killer just moves on. Thibodeau hides among the swine and when the killer comes he says, "Oink," and the killer moves on. Boudreaux hides in the vegetable garden and when the killer comes near he screams, "Po-ta-to!"

Anyway, back to my sermon. During the time of Jesus, the Roman Empire used fear very successfully. They would display the heads of revolutionaries on stakes at the entrance of major city gates, they would often have public executions and floggings, they had incredible ways of torturing people to obtain confessions or the location of known enemies of the state, the list goes on and on. Today in the Gospel Jesus openly discusses these risks with his Disciples. He is about to send them two by two to preach the Gospel

throughout the land, “to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 10:6.) As he prepares them for this mission, he gives them amazing powers: Power to “Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.” (10:8). He also commands them not to receive payment for their services. In fact, they are not to “Take gold, or silver, or copper... or bag for (the) journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff...” (10:9-10). If they are welcome in a village, they are to stay there preaching, they are to lodge in the homes that welcome them and they are to eat the food given to them. If they are not welcome, they are to dust off the dust of their sandals and move on to the next town (10:11-15).

Then Jesus begins to name the fears that are most likely in their hearts. He begins by acknowledging that he is sending them, “Like sheep in the midst of wolves” (10:16). They will be handed over to councils to be flogged in the synagogues, they will be taken to governors and kings because of their proclamation that Jesus is Messiah.” (10:17-18). When this happens, they are not to fear or worry. God’s Holy Spirit will give them the words to defend themselves at the time (10:19-20). The danger is real as “brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death” (10:21). When this happens, the disciples are to flee to the next town and continue their work.

The disciples can not expect better treatment than the treatment Jesus himself will get, for no “disciple is above the teacher, and no slave above the master” (10:24). Jesus himself will be treated in the same way. If they call Jesus the “prince of all demons,” they will most certainly treat the disciples in the same way. Yet, Jesus is very clear in his message: “Have no fear of them... Do not hear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul... So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows” (10:26-31). God knows what the Disciples will encounter and God will be with them throughout the journey. God knows them intimately and loves them greatly. He will be with them giving them the courage they need to “shout from the rooftops” without fear.

The command, “Do not be afraid” is mentioned a number of times during this passage. God is in control of our lives and he is in control of history. The Disciples are to preach the Gospel without fear because even if people can kill their bodies, no one would be able to kill their souls. This is the cost of discipleship. A disciple who loves his life more than Jesus is not worthy of Jesus. This includes all the comforts of our lives: family, wealth, possessions, status, fame, etc. “Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.” (10:39) This is a difficult mandate, but he who commands this will also equip us to be able to handle it. After all, “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

Now, my friends, how does this message apply to us today? After all, we are not being persecuted for our faith, we are not brought before governors and authorities because of our preaching the name of Jesus, we are not under the penalty of death for

him. Does this mean this Gospel is not for us? On the contrary, the danger in our lives is also real. Our dangers are more spiritual than physical, but no less a problem. We all suffer from fear:

Fear of this virus that has killed so many,
Fear of having to go back into quarantine,
Fear of unemployment and financial reversal,
Fear of ridicule if we talk about our faith,
Fear of sounding unintellectual, unscientific, unsophisticated,
Fear related to problems with our faith, perhaps don't really believe "this stuff",
Fear related to hopelessness: God is no longer with us or no longer cares,
Fear of change,
Fear of losing privileges or status...,
Other fears

Whatever our fears may be, today Christ commissions us to go out there and shout from the rooftops that Jesus is the Messiah of God, our Redeemer, our Savior. I pray today that God's Holy Spirit may give us the strength we need to become beacons of hope in a hurting world by sharing Christ with all people regardless of consequence. The church is the visible, physical, arms and feet of Jesus in and for the World. If we fail to introduce the Gospel of Salvation to those who have not come to a saving faith in Jesus and if we fail to love Christ through our suffering brothers and sisters, then it is not the cross of Christ we carry, but some other cross. Perhaps the cross of selfish individualism; the cross of superficial, status-seeking popularity; the cross of unbridled capitalism; the cross of inflated grandiosity; the cross of insatiable appetites...

I pray today that you and I will vow to carry the cross of Christ, because only this cross leads to freedom and Joy. If we choose this burden, Christ himself will make it light and bearable.

May God's Holy Spirit lead you into all truth and may the cross you carry be the cross of Christ. Amen!