Sermon at the first Service for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity
Jan 18th, 2016
Matthew 28:1-12

Friends, thanks for coming together to pray for Christian Unity, for a unity that is tangible, physical and just so deeply spiritual!

We have before us this year the example of how Latvian Christians are working together for unity; not only in the way they pulled together to plan this week in consultation with the World Council of Churches but in the way they continue to exert considerable effort in making their unity practical and influential in their wider culture.

In the gospel text we begin with a great earthquake, the only sufficient cause for the stated theme of this first day “Roll away the Stone.”

Here on the West Coast we rightly wonder if there can be such a thing as a “good earthquake,” our recent minor tremor was enough to get some of us all worked up!

For the Latvian Church, they have intimate experience with the horrible national “earthquakes” of Nazi occupation and then Soviet Communism.

But in their case, though there were many horrors, they know that some earthquakes do indeed presage something good.

It was the horrors of persecution that brought Christians together first in shared suffering but then also in shared appreciation for their differing gifts.

And it did so because the fear of the earthquake was overcome by the something that even fear cannot quench!

Of the several themes in our reading, fear would seem to be the dominant one; it’s mentioned explicitly four times.

Of any number of themes we might draw from today’s headlines fear would seem to be the dominant one; it feels all pervasive; a gradual cloud settling on a world of finite creatures who thought they knew best but in the end just don’t have what it takes!

Oh, different leaders speak boldly about change, about hope; we’ve all heard the line, “All we have to fear is fear itself,” spoken by President Franklin Roosevelt at his first inaugural in 1932 in the face of the massive earthquake that was the Depression.

It sounds brave, but despite our art, our poetry, our celebration of beauty, even, in our best moments, our progress, there’s really a lot to be afraid of.

Who here has not awoken at night gripped by fear, fear for a child, for a relationship that is going through difficulty, fear for security in the face of a job loss.

Fear is. Fear is not, with apologies to FDR something we can just “turn off,” by deciding not to fear fear!

What we need is something more powerful than our fear, what we need is an earthquake more powerful than the earthquakes that regularly convulse our lives and the nations of this world.

What we need is a mighty act that might give us a genuine choice *in* our different fears; that might, in the midst of our fears, prove to be more powerful, more motivating and more transformational.

This indeed is the gospel before us today, the good news of the mightiest of the Lord’s mighty acts. It is this that is our hope in the face of fear; it is the hope for our lives, for the Church’s unity and for a transformation of the systems that run on fear and that drive our world.

When the angel caused the earthquake by his descent from heaven and rolled away the stone signifying the mighty act that had already taken place, the Roman guards shook and became like dead men.

The mighty acts of God are not, at first, good news to the status quo; the earthquakes of change that affect all of us can be experienced in different ways.

Out of our need for security, sometimes out of our fear that our world is being undone, we simply are paralyzed, immobilized; an opportunity is offered to us but we retrench.

This has been the attitude of many churches in the face of the rapidly changing world situation.

No one but the psychologists predicted it but after what seemed to be a thaw in the culture religion wars in the middle of the last century, the last few decades have seen many churches give in to fear, to burying their heads in the sand in a belief that if they just stick to their positions eventually everyone will come around to positions that no longer carry conviction or pass the “new evidence” test.

In the 1950’s it seemed that churches open to dialoging with the sciences and humanities would win the day; Vatican II signaled a breach in the defensive wall; suddenly it seemed that progress would win the day, that applied rationality would prove more persuasive than all our petty tribalisms and prejudices; we would all learn together!

But that was a forgetfulness of the power of fear, of the fear born of growing greed and inequality. But, perhaps, fear as overplayed its hand!

As we witness the earthquake of right-wing extremism in our world; with hardline fundamentalism both being celebrated but also coming under heavy criticism in the US election process, it may just now be possible for a vision of Christian faith, not afraid, but open to dialogue, open to conversation, to once again take leadership in the church, even here in North America which has suffered from the isolationist, head in the sand scourge more than most other western societies.

The great tragedy is that there never was nor will there ever be a reason for this reaction to our fear. Notice that I didn’t say, there is no reason to fear but there is no reason to react to fear in this fashion.

That’s because of one Greek word *egerthe*. On this one word rests the whole gospel; if it is not true, if it is merely wishful thinking, a subjective experience of otherwise delusional former friends; if it is taken as a mere “symbol,” then this sermon, indeed all of Christian history and Christian claims come crashing down.

This one word requires four words to translate it into English: “he has been raised!”

“He has been raised” Just like me, the angel repeats it twice; the air has never been pierced by more pregnant and awesome words; an earthquake that relativizes all other shakings; an event so momentous that now it is possible draw water from a stone; now it is possible for good to come from totalitarianism; now there is no instance in our lives; there is no fear that has ultimate strength!

“So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell the disciples!”

Notice, the fear is still there, but there’s something more powerful, more motivating – great Joy!

Someone might ask, how is it possible to be both afraid and be filled with great Joy; I know, I experienced that on my wedding day, on the day my first son was born; on the day I was ordained to ministry

The mighty acts of God, this mightiest of God’s mighty acts are not throw-away events; they are events that draw us into Christ’s very purpose for the world: to live our lives as if “he has been raised,” to practice resurrection in our relationships, in our churches, in the world.

We can’t roll away the stone of fear in our society and in our lives, but praise the Lord, God has already done it! What we can do is face our fears head on, like the disciples, we can pray for faith that will allow us to transform our fear into actions; actions that one small step at a time draw us together in cooperation and unity.

There’s the interfaith community working for refugee resettlement; there’s small churches working together to feed the power and speak truth to power.

There’s many of us who won’t settle for fear-based religion that keeps us in our individual silos. What if each of us in this room were to pray for concrete unity every day this coming year till we celebrate this week in 2017; I wonder what stories we’d be able to tell; of people we’ve met, new relationships started.

Let’s go into Galilee, with our fears but with Great Joy, the Joy signalled by the angel; *egerthe*, he has been raised; the kingdoms of this world are becoming the kingdoms of our Lord and Christ and we’ve been give the grand task of proclaiming this mighty act!