Righteousness Without Fear

Luke 1:68-79; 3:1-6
Lethbridge Mennonite Church
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The title of my sermon this morning is not the most original one I've ever come up with.

But it contains two words that I think feature quite prominently in many people's conceptions of the life of faith, whether inside or outside of the church.

"Righteousness" and "fear."

"**Righteousness**": This idea that what God expects of us is moral performance. Holiness, purity, uprightness. *Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect* (Mat. 5:48).

"**Fear"**: The lingering suspicion in many people's minds that God is in fact a rather harsh judge, that punishment looms on the horizon if we fail to be as righteous as we ought to be.

Based on my own experience and on conversations with many people over the years, when it comes to how people view God and understand faith, the latter is very often a motivation for the former.

We try to be righteous because we are afraid of what will happen if we are not. We try to be good, because we fear the consequences of being bad (or at least of not being as good as we ought to be).

This is the kind of religion that many people grew up on and which many people continue to internalize today.

God, in this view, functions something like Santa Claus in the well-known Christmas ditty, "Santa Claus is Coming to Town":

> *You better watch out, you better not cry*
> *Better not pout, I'm telling you why*

Santa Claus is comin' to town

He's making a list and checking it twice
Gonna find out who's naughty and nice
Santa Claus is comin' to town

He sees you when you're sleepin'
He knows when you're a wake
He knows if you've been bad or good
So be good for goodness sake

Of course, aside from being a little creepy (a jolly round man in a red suit who sees you when you're sleeping?!), the song sends some rather mixed messages.

Be good for goodness' sake? Or be good for goodies' sake?

The motivation in the song certainly seems to be to avoid naughtiness not for the inherent value of niceness but rather out of a fear of not getting rewards.

It's a pretty straightforward calculus: goodness in exchange for presents.

I think many people view the life of faith in the same way.

You'd better be good! Not for the sake of goodness, but for the sake of what a severe and calculating God will do to you if you're not!

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Throughout Christian history, fear has often featured prominently in faith. Many medieval portrayals of the fiery torments that awaited unrepentant sinners seemed to be almost trying to outdo themselves in creating an image of a terrifying God who demanded compliance.

And anyone who grew up in the evangelical world will probably have, at some point, come across an overly enthusiastic evangelist using the threat of hell to attempt to produce conversions.

It's an effective strategy, at least on a superficial level. It works in producing at least a *kind* of obedience.

And talk of fear in the context of faith isn't entirely appropriate. Part of an honest Christian anthropology has always involved an acknowledgement that we are sinners who fall short of the what we were created to be and to do.

One of the things that the season of Advent trains us to do is to make an honest assessment of the state of our own righteousness and to remember that we are called to better things.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts it well in a little collection of Advent readings called *God is in the Manger*:

> We have become so accustomed to the idea of divine love and of God's coming at Christmas that we no longer feel the shiver of fear that God's coming should arouse in us. We are indifferent to the message, taking only the pleasant and agreeable out of it and forgetting the serious aspect, **that the God of the world draws near to the people of our little earth and lays claim to us**.[1]

So, there is a sense in which a *kind* of fear is appropriate when we honestly face our own sinfulness and our own complicity.

But what kind?

Is it terror in the face of a vengeful and retributive God who is looking for an excuse to punish? Or a sense of dread at the realization that that we have been misspending our days?

Is it like the fear of the schoolyard bully looking for someone to pick on? Or the kind of sinking fear that you have when, as a kid, you hear your parents say something like, "I'm disappointed in you?"

What kind of fear is appropriate in the life of faith? What role should fear play?

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Our main text this morning is a song.

It comes from Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. The background story is probably familiar, but perhaps a refresher is in order.

The angel Gabriel appears to an old and weary childless couple, the priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. "You will have a son," the angel says. "A son in the spirit and the power of Elijah… to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

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[1] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *God is in the Manger: Reflections on Advent and Christmas*, trans. O.C. Dean, Jr., ed. Jana Riess (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 8.

Despite being schooled in the history of his people, despite no doubt being familiar with the stories of Abraham and Sara and of Hannah, despite knowing that God specializes in surprise babies to signal a turn in his story… despite all this, Zechariah is skeptical.

"How can I be sure?" he asks.

And for this failure to trust in the promise of God, Zechariah is struck mute for 9 months—for the entire period of Elizabeth's pregnancy.

His tongue is loosed when the baby is born, and they give him the name John. And the next thing out of Zechariah's mouth is the song that we heard earlier.

It is a song about:

- Redemption for God's people (v. 68).
- Salvation and mercy (v. 71-72).
- The fulfilling of God's promises (v. 72-73).
- The forgiveness of sins (v. 77).
- About light shining into the dark corners of human lives, the dark corners of a world in need of rescue (v. 79).
- About feet accustomed to violence being guided on to the path of peace (v. 79).

Each one of these could be the subject of a sermon or two. But my attention this week zeroed in on verses 74-75:

> to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,
> and to enable us to serve him without fear
> in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

Zechariah's song is also a song about righteousness and holiness *without* fear.

The immediate context of these words is fear of enemies, not God.

Maybe Zechariah was thinking back to the Persians, the Assyrians, and the Babylonians—the long train of foreign powers that had occupied and oppressed his people.

Perhaps he was thinking of the current oppressors, the Romans.

Whatever the specifics, the fear in Zechariah's song was that of the literal enemies of his people.

But Scripture has this marvelous ability to speak in different ways to different people in different contexts across generations. A passage can never mean less than it meant in its original context; but it can always mean more.

So I think it's possible to apply this idea of "serving him without fear in holiness and righteousness" beyond the immediate political context of first century Rome.

This text can speak a word to us, as well.

Perhaps it also points to the great hope that God has prepared a way for human beings to pursue the good, the true, and the beautiful for the right reasons—not because we are afraid of what God will do to us if we don't, but because we have learned to want these things for their own sake and to love God for God's own sake.

This is one of the deep and abiding promises of Zechariah's song—that such a day will come.

It's a long process.

Zechariah's baby boy, John the Baptist, would grow up and employ a fairly heavy dose of fear in his proclamation of Jesus and his kingdom. He called for repentance. He called people nasty names like "brood of vipers." He warned people of the "wrath that was to come."

Fear is still useful, in some cases, for motivating correct behaviour. Any parent knows this. Sometimes a small child has to simply be afraid of getting burned in order to stay away from a hot stove. Sometimes a teenager needs a healthy dose of fear of consequences in order to avoid risky behaviours.

But it's to be hoped that the human journey is a growing out of this stage. It is to be hoped that children will eventually come to do what is right *because* it is right and good, not simply because they're afraid of bad consequences.

And, it's to be hoped that the life of faith will exhibit a similar trajectory—that it will be a movement beyond obedience rooted in fear to love anchored in love.

Ultimately the severing of the connection between fear and righteousness is a task for God.

The subject of Zechariah's song is God, start to finish. He sings about what *God* has done and what God will do.

The dawn from on high will break upon us and give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.

But we don't make the dawn break. God does.

Advent isn't about us summoning up the moral resolve to make ourselves righteous enough for God to come.

It's about us acknowledging our need for God to come and for receiving the gifts of God's coming.

One of those gifts, I am convinced, is the ability to pursue righteousness without fear.

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Perhaps an example will help us.

Last Saturday night, Claire and I were driving home in a snowstorm from a quick trip out to Rosthern to see Nick play in a basketball tournament.

We were getting bored of sappy pop Christmas music (at least I was!), so Claire decided to throw on the soundtrack of *Les Miserables*, the 2003 film adaptation of the classic book by Victor Hugo.

I had forgotten how incredible the music was. And how dramatic! It seemed an appropriate soundtrack for the last two white-knuckled hours from Brooks to home!

I was so inspired by the music that I got the movie out of the library and watched it later in the week. I knew the story, but I was struck again by the two main characters, Jean Valjean and the police inspector Javert, and their encounters with mercy.

Valjean was imprisoned for nineteen years for stealing a loaf of bread. Upon release, he ends up at the house of a priest who provides him with a meal and a place to sleep when no one else would.

Valjean repays his generosity by stealing the priest's silverware in the middle of the night and making a run for it. He is caught and dragged back before the priest.

Valjean expects punishment. He has told the police that the priest gave him the silverware as a gift, but this was obviously a lie—and a lie that the priest will no doubt angrily confirm.

Instead, the priest responds, "Yes, they were a gift. But Mr. Valjean, you forgot the candlesticks!"

The police are incredulous. Valjean is dumbfounded. He has been shown mercy that he did not deserve.

This is the turning point of his life. He goes on to become the mayor of a small French town, an adopted father to an orphaned little girl, a selfless man who puts the needs of others before his own.

The police inspector Javert, on the other hand, spends the next two decades trying to hunt Valjean down. He is a man driven by law and duty. He is inflexible and merciless. He uses fear

liberally as a tactic for producing correct behaviour. He is violent and severe in every way. Valjean has broken his parole requirements and must face judgment.

Eventually, the two come face to face in Paris. Valjean has a chance to kill his enemy. Javert has been captured by a group of revolutionaries. He is at Valjean's mercy.

But Valjean lets him go.

The police inspector is haunted by this. He cannot understand why Valjean would do such a thing. He cannot let go of his own need for justice to be satisfied. There is no room in his system for mercy and he cannot accept it.

It ends up driving him mad and he takes his own life.

Both men encountered undeserved mercy. Valjean accepted the gift and spent the rest of his days extending it to others. Javert refused the gift and it led to his death.

As I watched the film, it occurred to me that Valjean's life gave evidence of being enabled to live in righteousness free from fear.

Javert, on the other hand, could not let go of fear as the motivation for right behaviour. He could not accept the intrusion of grace.

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On this second Sunday of Advent, I wonder, can we accept the intrusion of God's grace?

Can we accept this promise from God that we really *will* be enabled to serve him in righteousness without fear?

Can we take steps to live into this reality even now?

Can we believe—*truly* believe—the words of 1 John 4:16-19?:

> God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.
>
> We love because he first loved us.

I want to close with a quote from a book I mentioned a few weeks ago, Dale Allison's *Night Comes*. It's a quote that talks about the question that I think nearly every important question of theology comes back to on some level: "What is God like?":

> I was once called to jury duty. When I walked into the courtroom and saw the defense attorney, I smiled and waved. He waved and smiled back. He was a friend, and my family's lawyer. The judge quickly sent me home. There was to be no favoritism in his courtroom.
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> The divine court, on a Christian view, must be radically different. For the judge isn't the detached enforcer of some inflexible law. The judge is rather the author of the parable of the Prodigal Son; and as shepherd and savior, as advocate and physician, **he's wildly biased in favor of all the defendants**.[2]

I love that last line.

I think Zechariah would have liked it, too. The God *of* whom and *to* whom he sang was surely wildly biased in favor of his people. He was a God of tender mercy, forgiveness, salvation. He was light in the midst of darkness.

And this is the God whose coming we anticipate this Advent season. The God who enables each one of us to serve him, in righteousness and holiness, free from fear.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

[2] Dale C. Allison, Jr., *Night Comes: Death, Imagination, and the Last Things* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 67.