

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I would like to begin today's sermon with a bit of context-setting for our Gospel, since the pericope begins in the middle of a story that we have not yet heard this year. The Transfiguration occurred, according to Matthew's account, "six days" after Peter's confession that Jesus Christ was the Messiah *and* Peter's famous rebuke by Jesus for questioning the coming death of Jesus—the famous, "Get behind me, Satan!" response of Jesus to Peter just after commending him for declaring the Messiah. Within the context of Matthew's gospel, we are still nine chapters away from the final Passover meal. It is in this context that we come together this morning for the final Sunday of the Advent-Christmas-Epiphany cycle and prepare ourselves for the start of Lent on Wednesday.

Jesus said to Peter, James, and John—his closest disciples—"Rise, and have no fear."¹

Throughout the New Testament, we hear people being told, "Have no fear." At the Annunciation, the angel said to the Blessed Virgin, "Do not be afraid." At the Incarnation, the angel said to the shepherds in the fields, "Do not be afraid." What might we learn from this declaration? Obviously there is a reason that we hear it so often in the Bible, so it must be important, right? God does not want us to fear Him or any of His messengers just because we might be in their presence. It's a good thing to be in the presence of the Holy One and holy things. As far as this fear thing goes, it was our late president, Franklin Roosevelt, who wisely said during the Great Depression that "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself."²

Martin Luther knew a few things about fear. After all, he lived most of his adult life under the penalty of excommunication, and with that penalty came the implicit sentence of death. Had anyone murdered him, the murderer would not have been charged with any crime. But Luther didn't worry about it, and lived a full life. However, for Luther, the fear he experienced for many years, and the fear that gripped him especially in his years as an Augustinian monk, was that fear caused by *Anfechtung*, those

¹ Matthew 17:7b (*English Standard Version*, © 2001)

² "First Inaugural Address," Franklin D. Roosevelt, March 4, 1933.

times of overwhelming spiritual terror or religious crisis. *Anfectung* for Luther came by the constant fear and worry that Christ would not only judge him, but judge him harshly for his sins. Luther wasn't alone in this understanding of Christ. In fact, it was the common medieval piety that Christ was mean, nasty, and vengeful Judge of humankind. It was this image of Christ which led, in a large part, to the raising up of the Blessed Virgin Mother as intercessor or intermediary between human beings and Christ. The loving Mary, after all, was a gentle and kind mother, and as the mother of Christ was able to approach him on behalf of those who sought his answer to prayer. Now, I want to caution you that I have just reduced the whole field of Mariology to about sixty words, so let us not overly concern ourselves with the details, but use this as a point from which we can understand *Anfectung* and fear of the Lord.

For the young Luther, and many pious men and women of the sixteenth century, there was the constant fear that Christ would judge them harshly, and that they had to work many good works, perform many acts of penance, and still expect to spend a lengthy time in Purgatory to atone for their earthly sins. In Purgatory, they would suffer in order to be purified of their sins, eventually being released from this period of bondage and punishment to enter into the glory of heaven. By the works of the living—the saying of Masses, the purchasing of indulgences, and similar actions—the time of punishment and turmoil in purgatory for the dead would be reduced, and the souls of the dearly departed for whom these works were done would be released into heaven.

John Tetzel, the infamous Dominican priest and indulgence seller extraordinaire of the sixteenth century, is said to have often quipped, “As soon as a coin in the coffer rings, the rescued soul from purgatory springs.” Because folks feared purgatory, the sale of indulgences was a booming business, and Tetzel was considered one of the best. Fear drove people to spend money on something that Luther would soon come to understand is actually freely given—God's grace. In truth, by generating fear in the people, the Pope and his representatives were able to raising a great deal of money for the building of St. Peter's Basilica and other causes of the papacy. In the sixteenth century, fear was a great motivator for raising money.

But fear is something that God does not want His children to experience. Time and again the words of comfort—“Do not be afraid”—are said to frightened people. Why, then, is fear used as a motivator by the church and others?

For Luther, this question was the crux of his theology. Contemplating it formally in the 95 Theses, Luther began to make his argument against the sale of indulgences as a method of earning one’s salvation. As he grew older, and his theology developed, Luther learned, and the feverishly preached and taught, that God’s grace is freely given, and there is no need to fear such things as Purgatory, for Purgatory is something of human invention in the first place, and grace cannot be bought at any price by human beings because it has already been purchased for us at a greater price than we might ever afford—the death of Jesus Christ, Son of God, upon the cross at Calvary.

When Luther finally had his “Aha!” moment, and understood what Paul was trying to teach the Romans in his letter to them about the grace of God being freely given and wholly undeserved, the need for fear, and much of the *Anfechtung* Luther was experiencing in his worry about whether or not he had done enough to be loved and saved by God was overcome. Luther understood the real and complete salvation that comes to those who believe and are baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection.

“Rise, and have no fear.” These are good words for us to hear this morning. We should take these words to heart and live by them. Obviously, as the baptized children of God, we have no reason to fear sin, death, and the devil. Oh, we might be challenged by the devil from time to time, because that’s what the devil does—challenges us when we are down, because he thinks we’ll be easy picking. And, we might—heck, we will—sin from time to time, because not one of us is perfect. Certainly we shall all die at some time, so there is no reason to fear dying, because after death we enter into the promised house with many mansions, and will celebrate with the heavenly host in the church triumphant. If these are the greatest of all our

concerns, and no less that Christ himself has called upon us not to fear these, then what is there to fear?

Should we fear change? We might not like change, but the truth is, change is the one constant thing in our lives. Political leaders change. The way we get the news changes. The seasons change. The words and music we use in worship change. How we worship and where we worship has changed a lot in the last fifty years. Church leadership changes, too. We can try and fight change, and spend a lot of energy and resources to delay a change, or we can embrace the change and see where we can provide positive input or support, and when we have a different point of view, we raise it in a loving, caring, Christian manner.

We are brothers and sisters in Christ, and just like brothers and sisters in any family, there will be times when we disagree, feud, spat, argue, and even stick out our tongues at one another. But when it is all said and done, even after the toughest sibling battles, we circle together when one of our own is in trouble, in need, or under attack. We don't agree 100 percent of the time in our own households, so why do we expect everyone to agree in the church? Why are we in fear of the opinions of others here?

So we don't own this building anymore, so what? The church is not brick and mortar, but flesh and bones. The foundation of the church is not made of concrete, but of Jesus Christ. Christ isn't present only in this room, and God does not sit only upon the mercy seat between the seraphim on the Ark of the Covenant, either. God is with us wherever we are, whenever we gather, and however we choose to worship. Christ has assured us that we should have no fear that he will not be present with us when two or three or more of us are gathered together in his name.

We gather together wherever we want, need, or desire to gather, armed with the Word of God and the Sacraments—visible signs of God's grace and love for us. Hearing the Word proclaimed among us, sharing in the cleansing of our baptism, refreshing ourselves with the bread and wine which are the True Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, we have nothing to fear. Rise up, then, from the crouching and cowering. Rise up from the self-imposed despair of not owning a building. Rise up and face

the day, the great day, that is before you and live without fear, for Christ is with you. Christ, our savior, our beautiful savior, awaits.