

“Flesh and Law; Fear or Freedom”  
 Sermon for 13 March 2022  
 Pastor Sam Richards  
 Text: Galatians 3:23-27

Last Week, in the middle of a moonless night, a young deer died in the lower pasture and the carcass rotted there . . . carrion crows and eagles battled over the purifying flesh. Watching this destroyed the myth of eagles as birds as predators, feasting on fresh kill whether fish plucked from the Kennebec, or rodents seized upon in the open fields. And strange to relate the play, Shakespeare’s “The Winter’s Tale,” has a gruesome scene in it: a shipwreck and an old man, Antigonus, first mauled to death and partially eaten by a bear. Now, theatrically, this brutal killing transpires on the coast of Bohemia! Never mind that Bohemia is a landlocked kingdom with no shoreline whatsoever. There is no seaway between Sicily and Bohemia period. And the death of Antigonus is tied to an even more gruesome business called infanticide: the princess Perdita is abandoned as a new born on “the wild shore of a desolate place!” I imagine that an abortion-hardened culture like our own might not even flinch at such barbaric behavior. And there is, left with the baby, a box of royal paraphernalia such as would give a traceable identity to the abandoned baby girl, who has a Russian lineage through her mother, Hermione. Now I call your attention to the fact that the perpetrator of this infanticide and the eye witnesses to the act all die—the knowledge of what went down and where perishes by bear and shipwreck. A fearful, and terrible condition of abject vulnerability—embellished by a storm of violence—are meant to summon from the audience a catharsis of horror absolutely Edgar Allan Poe-ish in nature. Something reminiscent of Grimm’s fairytales such as the ghoulish, or monstrous story of Hansel and Gretel where the haggish mother figure goes about to cook (and, we assume, consume) the pitiable lost children who have wandered into her cottage. Such dark and unthinkable things told in days gone by to assist youngsters *through a narrative thread, or mode in developing a robust vulnerability and courage* so as to survive, if not thrive, in the dangerous world we live in—a world of corruption, exploitation, violation and aggressive hostility wherein bad things happen, and all does not turn out well every time. We have predators to fear, and the most fearsome of them all is not the extinct *Tyrannosaurus Rex* but our very own selves.

God is not unaware of our plight. We probably don’t need the grim reminders of plausible depravity such as are visited on us from every side—from news, from propaganda and entertainment (they all seem so intertwined and alloyed these days). And, from a certain angle, the biblical narrative which precedes and envelops culture, arts and science combined, that narrative shares the objectives of robust vulnerability and courage but saving-ly adds love and liberation to the mix.

Before I get to that I must post an addendum to my opening remarks about the abandoned baby. As God would have it, there are shepherds in that place; seeking their lost sheep. And they are witnesses and participants in the whole business—picking up from where the drowning and attempted infanticide end. Well, of course, without witnesses there would be no tale to tell, the baby would have died and the sailors drowned end of story. As I said, in this world all things do not always end well—not for Antigonus, nor for the mariners who drowned in the process. But the orphaned Perdita is rescued, and raised by those humble shepherds so that, as it were, it is out of another Galilee that hope returns to the world! Repentance and time restore order and peace. Reason returns to the realms of Sicily and Bohemia! The “good” queen who presided amidst false accusation and

slander “comes back to life”—in a jolly good imitation of resurrection. The audience gets to go home as thoroughly reminded of their saving faith as if they had attended church, heard the word and celebrated the Lord’s presence at the table of His kingdom *without an overt mention of His name*.

So, my theme is “love and liberation,” or love and freedom as we find them in Galatians 3:23-27: **Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law.** This was our imprisoned state in which the law ministered grace. Our captivity was a captivity in the flesh, in the unredeemed state of nature wherein we were preyed upon and we ***preyed upon each other***. Remember, the dangerous world, a world of corruption, exploitation, violation and aggression—which is the fallen world—and we were oppressed in that world, all of us enslaved to the world, the flesh and the Devil. God, hearing our cries and heeding our plight, responded by sending His Son to save us. *That is the story-line we must never lose sight of!* **We were held captive under the law** (v.23) . . . **in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come** (vv. 24-25) . . . **in Christ Jesus, you are all sons of God, through faith.** (v.26). As **sons of God** we are no longer ***under the guardianship of the law***, and we have been translated from “the flesh and the Law to Freedom.”

“Love and liberation” have freed us from “fear” and from “shame.” I wish to address fear this week. And I start with noting that it seems to me that many, many people are terrified of freedom. To avoid freedom’s demands they practice such things as blaming, or blame-shifting. Victims tend to blame others, or circumstances, life’s challenges . . . and ***refuse freedom by evading responsibility***. They exclaim, “It’s not my fault, when it actually is.” When Christ has set you free, you know that is it He who holds the shaping power in your life from the moment of conversion on! This does not mean that God wasn’t directing your life early on—he was—what it does mean is this: when we trust in Jesus, we acknowledge Who He is in what He makes of us. The presence and power of the living Lord with you cancels all the influences of sociological background, education and experience (all the traumas as well as the tracts that lie between them!). Paul put it this way: **It is not I who live, but Christ in me.** . . .

**19 For I through the law died to the law that I might live to God. 20 I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. 21 I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died [a]in vain.” NKJ**

The most compelling fear I know of, besides the fear of death, is the fear of being exposed as a fraud, specifically “a faith fraud,” a pretender, an insincere believer. Mildly put it is a suspicion. It is the doubting that accompanies genuine believing. And what is genuine believing? It is tested faith, the faith that remains the other side of doubting, and inquiry. It is almost as if you don’t really know that matters most to you until what matters most is threatened to be removed!

“Samuel Rutherford said, “O my Lord Jesus Christ, if I could be in heaven without thee, it would be a hell; and if I could be in hell, and have thee still, it would be a heaven to me, for thou art all the heaven I want.” To be with God — to know him, to see him — is the central, irreducible draw of heaven.” - Randy Alcorn

“The critical question for our generation—and for every generation—is this: If you could have heaven, with no sickness, and with all the friends you ever had on earth, and all the food you ever liked, and all the leisure activities you ever enjoyed, and all the natural beauties you ever saw, all the physical pleasures you ever tasted, and no human conflict or any natural disasters, **could you be satisfied with heaven, if Christ were not there?** ” — John Piper, God Is the Gospel: Meditations on God's Love as the Gift of Himself

Today, we can't mention “what matters,” without “Black Lives Matter” slogans getting in the way. That's a stumbling block. Of course, when it comes to “justice” on our streets, the “killing of black people” for being black people is criminal. But **“being black” is not all that matters about black people.** Being saved is much more important than being black. It is likely that being black is no more important than being married in heaven. Jesus said, In the resurrection, people will neither **marry** nor be **given in marriage**. Instead, they will be like the angels in heaven. We should think about that—it may not be polite, but what if its true?

Being exposed as a religious fraud is a real anxiety for genuine believers. Fears can be rational; they can be based on what we are seeing and it's not made up. Life is fragile, we are not invulnerable . . . the world can present itself as dark, chaotic and dangerous. When bombs are falling on your city, it is strange to suggest that the size of your carbon footprint is your greatest fear! How does worrying about what you are going to cook for supper seem when your home is burning down? **Sound strange as in detached? Delusional? Obsessive?** Denial of clear and present danger is more insane than strange, I think, I wonder what you make of it? I grew upon under the treat of nuclear holocaust. We held air raid drills in elementary school and teachers told us to hide under our desks. We assumed protective postures lying on the athletic field. It was collectively terrifying. And, today, a Russian tyrant, blithely puts out that he is willing to deploy nuclear weapons to win his aggressive war—putting the world on notice. Putin has made the Ukraine war, our war with a threat. MAD, mutually assured destruction, is back on the table—and brinkmanship has toppled diplomacy seriously if not fatally. It is prudent to ask, beloved, “Is your house in order?” Does salvation matter more than survival? Which fear matters most, death or eternal damnation? We have Putin to thank, along with Chairman Xi for the return of fear. After they conquer everyone and destroy everything in the realm of all they have, what will they have gained? If this is all there is, as communists assert, then they end up with nothing. The dead cannot rule over anything. Fear is conquered by knowing Who it is that ends all things, knowing Who is is that has the final word. God wins regardless of how man loses.

There is a reason why being devoured by a bear is more dreadful than being killed in a car accident, or murdered by a terrorist. And that reason is this: we are innately and dreadfully “predatory” ourselves—we cannibalize fetal tissue and trade in body parts under the cover of “medical practice.” We consume children in sex trades and commodify babies to accommodate our adult tastes and preferences whether of life-style or genetic engineering! While who's at the top of the food chain may vary, our obsession with dangerous animals has to culminate in Putin (at least here and now). **Putin and nuclear war is the current existential threat. He is a “troubler of world peace”—and we have an abundance of distress and panic peddlers to carry his water!** The chief threat is

not climate change whether “global warming, or nuclear winter,” not COVID—at least not primarily COVID any longer. *Our new reality* appears to be much more dreadfully Darwinian than Charles could ever have imagined! Survival of the fittest. Gone is the day when the government exists to protect its citizens from peril, corralling everyone through COVID panic, has resulted in new compulsion, new coercions. Many civic freedoms are lying in the dust: freedom to protest, to dissent, to disagree, and to debate even—all censored, controlled or cancelled. The COVID czars have canceled much that we, pre-pandemic, considered inviolate. The right to privacy, the right to determine medical treatment, the right to your body, your data and information, all swept away for the common good.

**The dread of you which fell on every beast . . .** has fallen in this last days upon ourselves. When fear of death becomes the organizing principle for our lives; it is time and past time to look up. We should call to, and call upon the Lord; visit us with power from on high. Come refresh and revive us.

If all Cretans are liars, we are all Cretans! At least that’s where Paul’s quote of Epimenides in Titus leads.

Additionally, many fears are irrational and unreasonable. Upwards of 90% of what we worry about never happens—or so I am informed by statisticians who claim to know. Certainly, not everything turns out fine. We do fail and we will die. And that is precisely why we need robust vulnerability and courage fueled by faith, which grows slowly . . . gradually exposing to us who we are, what and how we love even while challenging us to deepen our identity in Christ and our love for what really matters.

All of this I suspect we are fully aware of. The desperation of our moment, however, does create a crisis of choice. We can focus on matters of dust (this world and everything in it) or we can focus on matters of glory. We can opt for the Pauline option expressed in Phil. 3:8:

**More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ,**

What happens when we preach hard against acceptable sin targets (you know, adultery, immorality, addiction, drunkenness—perhaps infidelity and divorce) may constitute cowardice; because we ignore the uncomfortable idolatries (comfort, pleasure, safety, power and prosperity) *that are actually laying us in the dust!*

The Bible commands justice for all. But preaching against segregationist policies, or racism, *when these practices are culturally endorsed* could (and did) result in loss of place, position and prestige: it is not impossible that outspoken white preachers could lose their church and end up a janitor, or high school counselor because they didn’t “steward their influence” well. Those who braved the culture knew *very well* that there was a whole line of segregationist preachers waiting for a call to their vacated pulpit. Yes, *it is very wise to note that we don’t have to engage in every quarrel*—Jesus openly refused to so engage, on occasion—we *don’t have to win every debate, or answer every taunt, or question*. How does one gauge whether waiting for the opportune time—for one’s moment—when is it

wisdom or cowardice? The motive of self-preservation may shed some light on that. The time to speak does come, courage notes that hour and speaks up.

The time to fight off thieves and predators, as the Good Shepherd modeled, is a matter of readiness; it's when they show up. Hirelings run, cowards bicker and delay as carnage and mayhem ensue. We know who breaks in, who climbs the wall and doesn't enter by the gate. (See John 10:11-14) We know who devours the widows' inheritances and defrauds orphans, those who hold office to grow fat off governmental largess in revenues. Lions don't run in the face of danger; but rabbits do. We should note quarrelsome people, and liars, who view themselves as courageous, as the only ones standing up for truth—what godless folk they are. Are they just tall talk?

Is there any American left who doesn't recognize that if everything is an existential threat, nothing is?!

If the actual battle is freeing man from slavery to his appetites, his lower instincts like lust, aggression, greed and fear, and these are the very things that the Law was given to help us manage, navigate and negotiate, how much happier the great news of the Gospel. If the strategy of our Adversary is to keep us chained to fear and shame, we should study these things better. The crowds clamored for Barabbas rather than Jesus because Barabbas was their idea of "a man," an assertive, zealous type, a seditious man, insurrectionist and "a fighter." They missed that the more spiritual man acts more like rising yeast, treasure hidden in a field, a dragnet, or an incubating mustard seed: **the kingdom is like a mustard seed . . .** If those who fight do not fight in the right manner, the right enemy, they do not even engage, or succeed in battle. Fight or flight, like fear, is an instinctual response, which is activated by various triggers so-called. *But looking to fight to feel a pulse of life*, a high, or reach a euphoric state is too easily commandeered by the Enemy and used against us. We tend to become enchained but what enchants us. ***There are wars within as well as wars without.*** We have to win in both theaters. Where temptations, and lusts for sex, power, fame and influence abound—where addictive substances and habits abound, it's far more complex than strong drink and drug use. The violence within spills over into our street, into violence and crime. Those who subdue their inner foes are those who will make our streets and homes safer. Both our hearts and our world are at stake.

And though this world, with devils filled,  
Should threaten to undo us,  
We will not fear, for God hath willed  
His truth to triumph through us:  
The Prince of Darkness grim,  
We tremble not for him;  
His rage we can endure,  
For lo! his doom is sure,  
One little word shall fell him.

The pandemic brought us "Easter without the church" and those who favor a country without religion exulted in the restrictions which wedged us out of fellowship. But "fear" disguised under "public safety" and the relatively empty phrase "the public good" was seized upon to undermine community, disrupt business life and harm us individually and collectively. Christian fellowship is vital.

What the guards discovered at Jesus' tomb was fundamental: ***the grave was not secure*** and any regime organized upon the threat of death and maintained by executions had summarily undermined itself. By divine action. Eternal life is not a fantasy, or an illusion. With the cross, we are moved beyond appetite, and we are freed from bondage to elementary powers and even beyond the rules and regulation approach of the Law. God moves His people away from service to self (where the fight is between ourselves, instincts and impulse) to that higher place, where peace and self-control are manifest, where we choose to serve God. Or, poetically, He moves us from dust to glory because He chooses to.

What the world has failed to calculate is this: while it is possible to regulate the church, the Lord Himself cannot be regulated. And, we note, He does not wear a mask in resurrection!

Here's the pattern: from fear to cry, from cry to consolation, from consolation to revelation and from revelation to glory.

Being frightened can be but the first step in our running to Christ and in Him acquiring the glory of God. So be it. Of course there will continue to be those who run to hide beneath the glory of themselves . . . or take comfort in the opinions others have of them (real, genuine, or counterfeit). But the end of the latter course is frustration and desperation.

Take our Master's example. He walked into the terror, the threats and the danger and, with His own life and His own blood, He upended the whole evil empire, setting all God's children radically free.

Now when they walk into that frightening place, they go confident that the God who loves them is in the mix, standing by them . . . even though they die they will never perish. If forced to choose between self-preservation and the soul saving faith, they will have already chosen.

In the wilderness of this world, the saints are fitted for a cross . . . *it is the crucified self that can find the courage to stand.*

**“These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.”**

It is ours to operate in this world with grace—even in land still controlled by the Devil. If you are walking with Jesus, **his rod and his staff shall comfort thee** . . . all the way through the valley and all the way home. You will never be abandoned for he has promised: **I will never leave you, or forsake you.** Take grace and mercy for your companions, let hope and peace join you in the way . . . and joy, for if you are in this company of pilgrims, joy can never be far behind.

**Amen.**