

Good Friday 2017

As John the Evangelist remembered it, there was a moment when the death of Jesus was assured.

It was the moment when Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, was overcome by fear. Chapter 19, verse 12, the Jerusalem leadership cried out, "If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor."

When he heard it, a wave of anxiety washed over him, a deep-seated fear welled up. There was nothing Pilate wanted more than to be counted a friend to the Emperor. Everything about his well-being depended on his friendship with the Emperor, who had made him and who could unmake him with a word.

And his unmaking could end in chains, could end in execution, could be shame for his children and his children's children.

To be counted an enemy of the emperor was the worst thing, the very worst thing he could imagine.

To hear the people he had been sent to control speaking of him in such a way shook him to his very core.

His terror was a moment of motivation, of decision.

He would not waffle between this Jesus and the Jerusalem leaders any longer.

He would not go down with the irritating rabbi who had spoken so disrespectfully to him.

Whatever Roman virtue he had inherited, whatever commitment to truth and justice and the public good he was supposed to have;

these he jettisoned in his moment of fear for himself.

Forget philosophy and the role of the righteous judge; it was time to save his skin.

"When Pilate heard these words," John writes at verse 13, "he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judgment seat,"

and with a little intervening humiliation of the Jewish leaders, he handed Jesus over to the soldiers to be crucified.

Many forces were arrayed against Jesus but it was Pilate's fear,

his fear for his own self, that led to the final condemnation of Jesus and his brutal execution.

In moments less dramatic (?), we too are controlled by our fears.

The voices that draw the fear out of us may be the voices of others, who tell us that there is much to fear,

that we may lose everything,

that we are surrounded by enemies who will take what is rightly ours away from us.

We make tragic decisions when we listen to such voices.  
Fear leads us to petty betrayals and to great ones.  
Fearing loss, we bicker with family members over money, things, and holiday gatherings.  
Fearing someone's response, we are silent in the face of a racist comment.  
Fearing for our safety, we have sometimes surrendered our commitment to the dignity of all people.  
It is fear that leaves us on the sidelines when God would clearly call us into the fray.  
Like Pilate, we will throw many under the bus of life, even people we love, because our fear can be so great.  
It is an instinct within us and one thoroughly caught up in sin.

But perfect love casts out fear, John writes in another place.  
And perfect love is seen throughout the story of the Lord's passion as well.  
The fearlessness of Jesus in this passage is rooted in love,  
the fullness of the love of God that filled him,  
that moved him throughout his ministry,  
that brought him to the fullness of his calling on the Cross.  
In the garden, when the soldiers and Judas had showed up,  
Jesus went toward them, the text said "knowing all that was to happen to him."  
He didn't shove James forward and say "here's the man you are looking for,"  
as a man full of fear would have done.  
When he rebuked Peter for attacking the slave of the high priest,  
he insisted that he was destined to "drink the cup that the Father had given him."  
He controlled the scene of his death from the Cross,  
arranging his mother's new life in the home of the Beloved Disciple.  
When the time came to die, he gently gave up his spirit.  
Throughout his passion and up to his death, he cared for others and gave of himself,  
knowing full well all that was happening to him.  
His perfect love cast out whatever fear might have reigned in his heart,  
and so he was able to offer himself for the sake of the world.

From his Cross then comes a resounding and eternal call to the way of love,  
a call to all of us.  
From his Cross comes a resounding and eternal call away from fear,  
a call to all of us.  
In Christ, God has allowed fearful men to condemn and reject him.  
They did their worst, they did what we would have likely done in their shoes,  
and God in Christ responded not in like, not in fear, but in love.  
Indeed, the Resurrection we will soon celebrate marks an end to all that we might most fear.

Suffering, death, these are shown in the Resurrection not to be the end, not to have their own weight forever.

The fear that any might destroy us,  
that some governor or emperor will have the last and final word over us;  
will seek his own purposes over us and destroy us in the process;  
this has been removed by the good news of Resurrection.

And moreover, now we know that God knows the worst that humankind can inflict and the worst that humanity has to face.

God knows our fears; has shared in them; has dispelled them with relentless love.

What seemed to many an end was a new beginning for the whole creation.

A new and nobler life, a life of love, that casts out fear, began on the Cross.