

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Fear is all around us in these latter days. The COVID-19 pandemic has kept us mostly locked up in our homes for almost three months, and only now, like little burrowing animals poking their heads out of their holes, are we cautiously venturing out of our homes, still fearful of what danger may be lurking to take hold of us, fearful of death.

The George Floyd incident brought forth anger, to be sure, but also renewed fears in our black community with every interaction with the police. The parents of young men who are black, we're told, have to have "the talk" with their young pre-teen sons, warning them of the dangers of interactions with the police, parents who worry, as their son goes forth, about a knock on the door delivering the message that their son has been shot. And whether you believe that fear is justified based on the statistics or not, remember: fear need not be rational to be very real.

In an article on racism in the *Reporter*, fear was expressed. Police officers were afraid: "It's scary to know that you're a target. When you have a lot of people decide if they like you based on a title, an outfit you wear and something that you represent ... they don't really see the true human underneath all that," wrote a Des Moines, IA police officer. "We have a police officer in our congregation. ... He's a righteous and godly man" wrote this police officer's pastor in Alexandria, VA. "This man, who I would turn to if I were afraid, has been turning to me: 'Pastor, I'm afraid to go to work. I'm being targeted. And if I respond and something goes wrong, it will be an international incident.'"

In that same article, a woman in Plymouth, MN, afraid that her home might be destroyed "[left] the lights on at night, ... took the things out of the yard that could be potential things you would throw, ... brought in the garbage cans, ... took down the propane tank, all of the things that they said."

That Des Moines police officer, by the way, had adopted a little girl when she was three, an African American girl. He's wondering, "how, as a parent — as a loving father — am I supposed to explain this to my 5-year-old?" And he also admits, "From a daddy perspective, it scares me a little bit that she could be treated differently by people."

Still other people today are afraid to open their mouths to voice a word of opposition to some of the more radical groups inciting riots on the one hand and promoting foolishness like "Defund the Police" or "Abolish the Police." They're afraid that they might lose their livelihood. It scares me; I'm afraid; it's scary; fear.

In the midst of his fears, David sings to the Lord in what would have been our Introit, "*When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in*

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God I trust; I shall not be afraid” (Ps. 56:3-4). When I am afraid, I shall not be afraid, because I trust in God! Therefore, he sings, *“What can flesh do to me? ... I shall not be afraid. What can man do to me?”* (Ps 56:4, 11)

Jesus, too, has something to say to our fears. *“Fear not!”* Prof. Jeff Gibbs of the St. Louis Seminary suggests that these words are addressed to a larger audience than just the twelve whom we heard Jesus send out in last Sunday’s Gospel. I agree. Therefore, three times in our Gospel text Jesus says it to you: *“Fear not!”*

First, Jesus says, *“have no fear of them”* who *“malign those of [the master’s] household.”* Of course, that’s what people do to us in Christ’s church. But remember, Christ preached: *“Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you”* (Matt. 5:11-12). We hear a bit of this in our Old Testament lesson leveled against Jeremiah, who had just been released from the stocks: he had been mocked, made a laughingstock; he had been denounced; he had been plotted against.

That’s exactly what happens to us still today in Christ’s church. You are mocked, laughed at, denounced as stupid, gullible, anti-scientific for believing the Scriptures, the signs and wonders that Christ did, for believing that Jesus died for the world’s sins (1 John 2:2), that Christ’s shed blood could cleanse you from your sins (1 John 1:7), for believing that Jesus truly did rise from the dead and opens the way to heaven for you (1 Cor. 15:20). But you know that when you confess Jesus as Lord with your mouth and believe that God raised Him from the dead, you are truly saved (Rom. 10:9).

You are denounced as stupid, gullible, anti-scientific for believing that a bit of water washed over you, like that washed over Jai’layah today, can do anything, let alone “[work] forgiveness of sins, [rescue] from death and the devil, and [give] eternal salvation to all who believe,” as Jesus “says in the last chapter of Mark, ‘Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved’” (Luther, Small Catechism, Baptism, Second), and you do believe it because you know that the water is not just plain water, but it’s “the water included in God’s command and combined with God’s word,” and that water is “a life-giving water, rich in grace, and a washing of the new birth in the Holy Spirit” (Luther, Small Catechism, Baptism, First & Third).

You are denounced as stupid, gullible, anti-scientific for believing that the bread we are about to eat and the wine we’re about to drink actually deliver to our mouths Christ’s very body and His very blood, and that by eating them with faith, our sins are forgiven us, as Luther says, “Whoever believes these words [Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins,] has exactly what they say:

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‘forgiveness of sins’” (Luther, Small Catechism, Sacrament of the Altar, “How can such bodily eating ...”).

But Jesus’ words in our text prepare us for this rabid opposition by reminding us that He Himself experienced it, and that the *“disciple is not above his teacher.”* Jesus also steels us in the midst of the opposition by telling us that all will be revealed in the end. As St. John says, *“we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is”* (1 John 3:2). We will know fully, as St. Paul says, even as we are fully known (1 Cor. 13:12). On the other hand, we also know that the unbelieving scoffer will receive his just punishment, as Scripture says, *“Condemnation is ready for scoffers”* (Prov. 19:29), and *“whoever does not believe will be condemned”* (Mark 16:16).

Second, Jesus says, *“do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”* Man can take the life of man — we witness it far too often, but remember, for those in Christ, though the body sleeps in the ground awaiting the resurrection, the soul lives on, as the beautiful hymn says: *“This body in the grave we lay There to await that solemn day When God Himself shall bid it rise To mount triumphant to the skies.”* *“The soul forever lives with God, Who freely hath His grace bestowed And through His Son redeemed it here From ev’ry sin, from ev’ry fear”* (LSB759).

God, of course, is the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell, but the good news is that God doesn’t desire it. That’s what Jesus is about. God didn’t send His Son into the world to condemn the world but to save it through Christ (John 3:17). Therefore, let us “fear, love, and trust in God above all things,” for in Christ, our God has won the ultimate victory over sin and death, and His victory is our victory. That’s why ultimately we can scoff at death and those who cause it, saying, *“O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?”* (1 Cor. 15:55), because Christ’s resurrection means that death has been swallowed up in victory, because *“the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed,”* because *“the perishable [will put] on the imperishable, and the mortal [will put] on immortality”* (1 Cor. 15:52, 54).

Third, Jesus says, *“Fear not ... [because] you are of more value than many sparrows.”* Here is an argument from the lesser to the greater. The Father knows whenever a sparrow falls to the ground; that’s impressive. Even more impressive is how much the Father knows and cares about you — even your hairs are all numbered.

But how much more are you loved and cared for even than that! All over Scripture you are told it: *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son”* (John 3:16). *“Greater love has no one than this that someone lay down his life for*

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his friends” (John 15:13). *“In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins”* (1 John 4:10).

This is the perfect love that we confess, as we confess the Son before men. Let us confess Him, even *“proclaim [Him] on the housetops,”* even in the face of mockery, ridicule, and scorn. Let us proclaim Christ, who loved us and gave Himself up for us, the spotless Lamb, the perfect sacrifice. And baptized into Him, we are brought to Him, and are clothed with Him, and abide with Him and in His love. As St. John says, *“Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God”* (1 John 4:15), in the God who is love; which brings me back to our beginning — to our fear in this world, to Jesus’ words to *“Fear not,”* and to David’s: *“When I am afraid, ... I shall not be afraid.”* Dear saints, baptized into Christ, we need not fear as we trust in Christ, for we are surrounded by the love of God in Christ, embraced by His perfect love, and St. John assures us, *“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear”* (1 John 4:18).

May God take away your fears and grant you peace as you confess Christ boldly before men.

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