

## Sermon Archive 305

Sunday 9 August, 2020

Knox Church, Christchurch

Reflections for Peace Sunday

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



**The First Lesson:** Micah 4: 1-4

**A Reflection:** Being afraid

I remember thinking, at the time she started describing the different alert levels, that the Prime minister was going into quite a lot of detail. She, and the people around her had clearly spent a lot of time and thought putting it together. I imagined it was probably just to be ready for the unlikely event that we might need to go into one of the levels - maybe. But there was, at the back of my mind the quiet question: "does she know something I don't?"

The next business day she gave us 48 hours notice of going into, not level 1, not level 2, nor level 3, but the top level 4. The little doubt, the background question proved to be prophetic - correct.

Since we came out of lockdown, experts have been quite clear that we are still at alert. They've told us that, proper public responsibility notwithstanding, it's almost certain that some community transmission will occur. We've been living our free, newly appreciated public life under a background warning.

One of the skills I've developed for getting on with life lately, has been developing a filter for certain voices. One of the voices belongs to Michael Baker, professor of epidemiology at Otago. It felt to me as if Michael was committed to being as gloomy as possible - ringing his bell and wailing woe. "Cheer up, Michael" my filter said, as I put him to one side, dismissing him as someone who thinks that fear is my motivator. Not fair, Michael, that you should do this to me! Let me get on, and live. I'm trying to manage my background fear.

Another voice that I have always taken seriously, because it belongs to a man I know and trust, is that of David Skegg. David, also from Otago, is another epidemiologist. This last week, it was David who said we shouldn't be passing the sign of peace at church - because it just may be that there is already community transmission undetected in the community.

As I did some months ago, I found myself again asking "does this person know something I don't know?" I remembered what the same question preceded last time. I remember how that background feeling proved to be related to something real. I almost freaked out.

It may not be real. It might simply be that David's been spending too much time with gloomy Michael.

But my reaction to David's advice revealed to me that I am living with a quiet sense of fear. I walk around my world backpacking an anxiety.

The philosophers have long called it "angst" - this sometimes unexamined, low-level sadness, background worry about something, or nothing - the reptile brain scanning for danger. That in us, to which we wish God could say "do not be afraid" - as if that would fix it.

In days to come, the mountain of the Lord shall be raised up, and a new way of living will be established. People will sit under their own vines, and under their own fig trees, **and no one shall make them afraid.**

There is, within this vision of the world at peace, a state of the people being not afraid anymore. "For the mouth of the Lord has spoken". On a Peace Sunday, wouldn't it be wonderful if the Lord were to speak.

**Music for Meditation:**            Improvisation  
   Daniel Cooper (b. 1997)

**The Second Lesson:**            Genesis 37: 1-4, 12-28

**A Reflection:**                    I'm afraid

A quick critique of this family situation! A seventeen year old enjoys telling tales against people he's meant to be helping. An elderly man does

not see that his favouring of one child over the others is creating family tension. One group cannot speak peaceably to the one beyond the group. A stranger in a field gives word of the whereabouts of some people who probably would rather not be found - informing. Seeing someone at a distance, but coming their way, a group describes him in a derogatory way, then makes plans to murder him. They plan to lie to their father about what they have done. Someone is thrown in a pit, so that he can die slowly of hunger and thirst. Then a commercial opportunity comes along, so they decide to grab it, selling the victim for profit, rather than leaving him to die. Then they pretend to themselves that they've made this decision out of some brotherly respect for the victim - after all, "all lives matter".

***I am afraid*** that, while this story may be four thousand years old, these sorts of things still happen. Their on-going persistence in the human story makes me afraid that we're always going to have to deal with things like this.

Wouldn't it be good if the Lord could just speak, and things would come right? Wouldn't it be good if the good people could just shout moral instruction at the bad people, so the bad people would change their ways? If it worked like that, we could fix creation, create peace, with just a word. Choose a word - a word like "love", a word like "peace", and shout it out! Problem solved.

No; things are more complicated than that for the peace makers. It seems to need to be more about living within it, absorbing some of the pain, carrying a cross through it, living, moving and having being within something or someone larger than it - until saying "it is finished".

***I am afraid*** that that is the only solution. Persistent engagement. Cost. Truth. Of that, I am afraid.

**Music for Meditation:**           Improvisation  
  Daniel Cooper (b. 1997)

**The Third Lesson:**

Matthew 14: 22-33

**A Reflection:**

For the afraid

Along his road of persistent engagement, cost and truth, he meets other people. He notices that they're capable of being afraid. When they're in a storm, they're afraid. When they see a figure on the waves, and think it must be a ghost, they're afraid. He says to them "Take heart, it is I; *don't* be afraid". But even so, as one of them begins to sink in the storm, they're afraid. So he catches the sinking one, and brings him to a place that is safe, and the storm dies down.

I wonder whether this is an image for us, who long for peace. Can we make the family of Joseph behave? Can we stop the world's violence with a word? No; we can't. But we can be with those who are sinking, helping them to not be afraid - until it feels like they're sitting under their own vines and fig trees, and things are well. Perhaps the persistent engagement, for the purposes of peace, is being with people, in their fear, and lifting them up.

The German phrase "Bist du bei mir" means "If you are with me".

**Music for Meditation:**

Bist du bei mir, BWV 508

J.S. Bach (1685-1750)

Soloist: Elizabeth Christensen

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