

# SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

November 19, 2006 –Twenty Fourth Sunday After Pentecost

Text: Mark 13:1-8

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Let us pray, Steadfast God, your promise to us is life, even when much around us and within us is withering and dying. Grant to us, O God, your strong presence in our lives and those whom we love, and strengthen us to be your messengers to a world gripped by fear. May your Holy Spirit speak through these words and move through our hearts, that you may lead us to commit ourselves, our time, and our possessions, to building up your beloved community. Through Jesus we pray, Amen.

## I.

If there seems to be one message in today's Gospel that is louder than all the others, it is this: "The times they are a-changing, and the future doesn't look too good." But sometimes the loudest message isn't the right message.

I don't know about you, but even five years down the road, this line--"All will be thrown down. Not a stone will be left on a stone"--still holds echoes for me of September 11<sup>th</sup>. Each of us here, I am certain, has our memories of the fear of that day and the days that have followed.

From that day, when it looked like a volcano had erupted in downtown Manhattan and we had no idea how many were dead, until today, when our troops are engaged in wars that seem to have no end in sight, and we don't know how many will die, the constant drumbeat impressed on us has been one of fear: "Be alarmed! Be alarmed! Be alarmed!" It is almost as though it is a good thing to be alarmed, to have faith in this fear, to believe that all our worst fears will be realized. But faith is the opposite of fear! Fear has become an idol to which we are called on to offer sacrifices of not only privacy and comfort but also of flesh and blood.

The marks of fear are some of the deepest on our souls. For some of us that has been fear of being beaten, or thrown out of the homes we grew up in, or fear losing friends or jobs, or, not the least of which, fear of being cut off from the God who promises to be present during our hardest times.

Jesus' disciples knew fear, and asked Jesus in private how they would know when to prepare for the end of the world as they knew it, the destruction of the great Temple in Jerusalem that was the center of the Jewish faith for hundreds of years, and which indeed did fall under assault from the Roman army nearly 40 years later, in the year 70. They wanted certainty about how to see ahead and make the arrangements they would need to make in order to protect themselves and their loved ones.

I don't blame them one bit for wanting some inside information on what was going to happen. Because, honestly, often I live with a lot of fear that I'd just as soon not have—fear of small, trivial things, and of great things, of how I'll get done my last school papers and presentations, of where I'll be sent should I be approved for ministry in the ELCA in a few weeks, of what will happen when I come up for real against the law of Vision and Expectations, as this congregation did 15 years ago, fear of success as much as failure, fear of my own irrationality and hurting of other people, fear, paradoxically, of being loved for who I really am.

In the midst of all that fear, I hear the loud and obnoxious refrain of "Be afraid! Be very afraid!"... above all other voices in my own mind, on the news, in the MUNI, on the street corners. But Jesus has a good line here. Blink and you'll miss it. "Be not alarmed." What do you mean, Jesus, be not alarmed? Easy for you to say! You get a free trip to heaven!

Ok, well, maybe he's got a point. Fear isn't really doing much good, anyway. Caution may be a good thing once in a while, but fear can just as soon bring you and everyone else down. Perhaps there is indeed another way!

## II.

I must confess another fear I have. It's a fear of commitment. Because commitment defines who you are, or at least what you hold to be important. It means that you're not going to up and go just because the going gets tough. It's not necessarily something I feel like an expert at, although this is indeed commitment Sunday here at St. Francis. So, I'm going to ask you to think of your commitments. Which commitments are most important to you? Commitments to friends, to elderly parents who need many kinds of support, or those near and dear who are struggling? Commitments to vocation and work? Commitments to catching the latest installment of Grey's Anatomy or Desperate Housewives? Commitments to stopping war and oppression of God's people, to feeding the hungry, to spreading God's Good News? There are so many wonderful things to be committed to!

If I do say so, one thing I have learned about St. Francis over the least three years is that this is one committed congregation! Committed to the community outside these doors through programs, special events, ministries, and particularly the San Francisco AIDS walk, for which St. Francis is consistently in the top five money-raisers, and certainly number one in fellowship with the many friends of St. Francis and the SFSU Geography department who walk together.

St. Francis, as I have both experienced and witnessed, is also committed to welcoming new people in Jesus' name, and supporting them through prayer both spoken and acted out in service. Welcome here is not just a nice word.

Commitments are personal here as much as they are financial—indeed, I think it's from the personal commitments that we have for each other and for the mission of Jesus through this particular Church that it is possible to give.

And, I think, it is this commitment of support for each other and for the God we serve that can, finally, overcome the many fears with which we are assaulted each day in the news, sometimes at our schools or workplaces, or even from within our own hearts. It is, in fact, God's commitment to us, in this place, in our lives, from our mother's wombs, up until the present moment, and into the future that will not present fewer fears but perhaps more, a commitment we know to be true from our presence here in worship, it is God's deep and abiding commitment to us, that can empower us to act in God's name, that can wipe away the fear, that can knowledge of God's loving commitment to those who do not know about it, or who doubt it could ever apply to them.

To many of us here, who have had the door of the Church slammed shut in our faces at one point or another in our lives, this commitment of God is no small promise, but one that can transcend the attempts of humans to cut us off and sink us down. And once we have felt this commitment, this grace, some way in our own lives, the Spirit sends us back into the streets, the workplaces, and the homes we inhabit, to communicate however we can that God loves and does not hate, that God holds the power over life and death and wishes life for us and for all, to proclaim that those who dictate fear to us cannot have the last word. This commitment of God sends us back to "grow our mission" to those for whom the light of Christ may again be a source of comfort and thanksgiving, when before it might have been a curse. May the day come when the name of Christ is no longer a curse to anyone!

### III.

It's not completely fair to tell you that I don't have any commitments to speak of. I do feel a commitment to this congregation, to the faith which we share in Christ, and, although some say I should *be* committed, I feel a commitment to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, although I do not feel committed to its rules which prohibit committed relationships for gay and lesbian pastors and which eject congregations that are doing God's work, such as St. Francis and First United Lutheran.

Yet, the One who has promised is faithful, even when human institutions are not. Even when wars, earthquakes, and terror threaten us, God remains steadfast. Even when false prophets, a little of which we have in each of us, for whom it is easy to condemn others while drawing upon themselves the same condemnation, spread gloom and doom, God's joyful Spirit enters our yet trembling hearts when they are at their wits' end, and saves us for yet another day.

For the imagined end is not the real end. The end of the temple is not the end. The end of America is not the end. The end of our lives is not the end. Because the end of Jesus' life in deep shame on a cross was not the end. What is there to fear, if Jesus died and is yet alive? And not only alive in one place, but alive to us all, present among us, in our community and in the sacrament that we share? If we didn't cut ourselves off from God then, with that cross, how can we do it now? It's impossible! For God has kept the commitment with us that nothing in all of creation can or will ever separate us from God's love in Christ.

In the words of our esteemed president (Bush, that is, not Burger), I say, "Bring it on!" Bring on the fear, and we can meet it with love. Bring on the shame, and we can meet it with hospitality. Bring

on the insult, and we can meet it with blessing. Bring on the threats of eternal damnation, and we can meet them with the promises of God for eternal life. Bring on the bills, and we can meet them with bounty!

For God's promise to us is life.

May this promise, and the faithful one who guarantees it is yours now and forever, be with you, strengthen you, and bless you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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