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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
6/7/2015, Pentecost 2B, Lectionary 10
When Fear Was New On Earth

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

¹⁰And [Adam] said, “I heard the sound of thee in the garden,
and I was *afraid*...

Later in this morning’s liturgy we are going to sing the hymn “Children of the Heavenly Father.” That’s a tribute to our member Ann Wilson and to her Swedish heritage. There is such a lovely tone of encouragement in that hymn. Think of the first verse, for example:

Children of the heav’nly Father
Safely in his bosom gather,
Nestling bird or star in heaven,
Such a refuge ne’er was given (LBW 474)

The holy Gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ wants us to feel safe. It wants us to realize that we have a refuge in him. It does not want us to have to be so afraid in this life of ours.

This morning’s reading from Genesis 3 takes us back to a time when fear was new on earth. It’s not new anymore. In our world, there is much to fear. Nowadays, for example, I fear for Ann Wilson who is struggling with illness. We fear for our loved ones, our land, our church, our city. We are accustomed to fear, we fight against it, and we are haunted by it. But there was a good time on earth – a better age – when there was no fear. I like to imagine such an age.

Before his fall, Adam could walk right up to the most powerful animal – the mighty lion or the fierce grizzly bear – and treat that animal in the most friendly way. I imagine he could play with it, wrestle with it, hang around with it, observe its movements and its ways, learn about its social structures. Adam did not fear the lion, nor the grizzly bear, nor the thunder, nor the lightning, because the Garden of Eden seems to have been like the peaceable kingdom spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, where the wolf dwells in peace with the lamb, and where...

They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for
the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the
waters cover the sea. (Isaiah 11:9, KJV)

Centuries might have passed for Adam and Eve before ever they felt that phenomenon we call “fear.” But, alas, in this morning’s reading, we learn about

the introduction of that phenomenon: fear. We learn about the time when fear was new on earth.

ACQUAINTED WITH FEAR

Now, fear stalks our world. It strides into our hospital rooms, it sneaks upon young people in the quiet of the evening when they wonder about their grades and careers and whether they will make it in this world. Fear haunts our dreams, our retirements, our romances. We fear for our health, for our prosperity, for our reputations, for our talents, for our senses, and for our clarity of mind. We fear accidents, we fear betrayals, we fear rip tides, we fear the power of our passions, we fear our own laziness. Like Dorothy on the Wizard of Oz, we fear...

Lions, and tigers, and bears! Oh, my!

But, as Martin Luther pointed out, Eve could march right on up to the serpent in the garden with no trace of fear in her heart. Before she ate that apple, she was unacquainted with fear:

With what great unconcern Eve listens to the serpent! We do not talk so intimately with a puppy that has been raised in the home and has been made accustomed to it—or with a chick.
(LW 1:171)

What a wonderful condition to be in: to be unacquainted with fear! To converse with a serpent or to visit with a shark just as calmly as if we were playing with a puppy.

But now, in this morning's reading from Genesis 3, we find fear in the hearts of Adam and Eve. We recognize the signs of fear. We recognize the instinct to hide, to deny wrongdoing, even to toss our loved ones into the fray if only we can find a moment or two of peace. Martin Luther expresses well the agony of fear into which the disobedience of Adam and Eve had cast them:

So, then, before sin they did not look for hiding places; ...they stood upright and praised God with uplifted face. But now they are terrified by the rustling of a leaf. Oh, what a grievous downfall, to plunge from the utmost sense of security, from confidence and delight in God into such awful terror that man shrinks from the sight of God more than from the sight and presence of the devil! Adam and Eve were not avoiding the devil; it was God, their Creator, whom they were avoiding!
(LW 1:171)

It was futile, it was a sign of panic, that Adam and Eve tried to hide themselves. Did they not realize that they were trying to hide in God's garden, every square inch of which he knew and could see clearly. Where could they go? Where could they hide? As little as Jonah could set sail and flee toward Tarshish yet never really escape the gaze of the Lord, so Adam and Eve could not fail to be found out by their Maker.

A divine cry goes out from the Lord!

⁹But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him,
“Where are you?”

“Where are you?” Are you pretending to be true to the Lord, but with a heart that is a thousand miles away from him? St. John Chrysostom expands on that question:

“Where are you?” How did this happen to you? Who has brought you to this changed condition? What kind of robber and brigand has robbed you like this in an instant of all the substance of your wealth and cast you into such indigence? Whence has come the nakedness you are experiencing? ...What is this sudden transformation? What tempest has all at once in this way sunk all your precious cargo? What has happened to make you try to hide yourself from the one who has been so kind to you and placed you in a position of such importance? (Chrysostom, on Genesis 3, Homily 17)

Before Adam and Eve disobeyed the Lord, they had known peace, calmness, and joy. Now, their conscience is disturbed. Now they fear being found out as sinners. When Adam and Eve sin, they flee from the Lord. And when they are caught, they multiply the misery: they blame their sin on others. Eve blamed her fall upon the serpent. Adam did something even worse: he blamed his fall upon Eve, his own wife. He threw her under the bus, if only he could deflect the blame away from himself. And in the end, both Adam and Eve seem to blame God himself for their fall. Adam blames God for having given him Eve. Imagine that! How low! And Eve blames one of God's creatures – the subtle serpent. She seems to think that this explanation suffices:

And the woman said, The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat.
(Genesis 3:13, KJV)

“Let it not be said that *I* did anything wrong!” It is the cry of the guilty heart before a holy God.

NEITHER THE SINNER NOR THE SUFFERER NEED

DESPAIR

Now, let us turn from these melancholy matters and take comfort in the kindness of God toward these original sinners. For if the *sinner* need not fear the loss of God's love, neither need the *sufferer* of illness or poverty or any threat fear the loss of God's love. And if we have God's love, in the end, we have everything!

Let me begin with a quote from Chrysostom, who observes that the Lord goes on loving Adam and Eve as a father loves a wayward child:

...[the Lord] did not stop loving them at that point. Instead, faithful to his own goodness, he is like a loving father who sees his own son through negligence committing things unworthy of his upbringing and being reduced from his eminent position to the utmost depravity: he is stirred to the depths of his being as a father, yet, far from ceasing to care for him, he displays further concern for him in his desire to extricate him gradually from his abasement and return him to his previous position of dignity. (Chrysostom, on Genesis 3, Homily 17)

And so, the Lord does not cast a lightning bolt and destroy Adam and Eve. He punishes them, casting them out of the garden, making childbirth painful, and making the ground hard to till and contrary. But he lets them live and in the course of time, the Lord gives humanity his holy law, that the man and the woman might regain dignity. The Lord leaves them life – the very life that you and I know to this very day.

Now let's move on to a point by Martin Luther. His point is a crucial one. It concerns the gospel. Luther lifts up a detail in the text that is well worth noting: that the Lord permits Adam and Eve to *overhear* the Lord's judgment against Satan and the serpent:

These words are spoken for the sake of Adam and Eve that they may hear this judgment and be comforted by the realization that God is the enemy of that being which inflicted so severe a wound on man. Here grace and mercy begin to shine forth from the midst of the wrath which sin and disobedience aroused. Here in the midst of most serious threats the Father reveals His heart; this is not a father who is so angry that he would turn out his son because of his sin, but one who points to a deliverance, indeed one who promises victory against the enemy that deceived and conquered human nature... Thus the sun of comfort, previously enveloped by black clouds, rises above the clouds and with its most

welcome light shines on their frightened hearts. For Adam and Eve not only do not hear themselves cursed like the serpent; but they even hear themselves drawn up, as it were, in battle line against their condemned enemy, and this with the hope of help from the Son of God, the Seed of the woman. Forgiveness of sins and full reception into grace are here pointed out to Adam and Eve. (LW 1:189-90)

The fall of Adam and Eve was certainly a great calamity, introducing much suffering into the human story. But their fall, and our fall, is never so bad as to exhaust the love of God for us.

FEARS OF LIFE

In any congregation, there are fears besetting people in the pews. No one else might know, but the person himself, herself is trembling and sick at heart inside. A few months ago, we feared for Jon Tota. He is doing well now, thanks be to God. Now we fear for Ann Wilson, who is in earnest need of our prayers. Other fears beset our people. Mothers and fathers fear for their soldier children, for their struggling children, for their straying children. The whole world sometimes seems a house of horrors at a gigantic country fair, except that the horrors are not for fun, but for real death and destruction. Indeed, the Letter to the Hebrews speaks of our whole human race as being in bondage to fear. That is why Jesus was born, to save us from fear:

And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. (Hebrews 2:15, KJV)

None of us can somehow wave a magic wand and cause fears and dangers to disappear. And yet there is one thing we can do for one another – one important thing we can do beyond any practical help we can give. We can remind every frightened soul we meet that when the serpent worked the fall of Adam and Eve, he thereby hurt people who are very dear to God. And the Lord does not mean to let Satan get away with it. He does not mean to let Satan win over us. In the resurrection of Jesus, the holy Seed of the woman has indeed crushed the head of Satan, and so life is going to work out okay.

You and I have a Refuge in this world. We have a mighty Fortress. Even when our hearts are fluttering with fear, and our imaginations are depressed by the road ahead, the truth is that those who build their house on Jesus are building on a Rock that will not fail them. Fling yourselves, then, into the battle for good in this world. Keep on peddling, day by day, and commend the outcome to Jesus. Take heart in a frightening world. Take heart because of Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.