



**Ashfield First Congregational Church/United Church of Christ
429 Main Street – PO Box 519 – Ashfield MA 01330**

Sermon “Until the Moon is No More” Rev. David Jones January 3, 2021

I was reading something the other day, a dialogue between two men. One of them was a priest, the other one--it was less clear to me who he was, whether he had faith. It seemed like he might say he had questions, so he would fit in well among us. But just in passing, in the course of this dialogue, one of them claimed that “faith is the opposite of fear.” Maybe you have heard this claim before. And there is a part of me that thought nothing of this claim--after all, in my experience, there is *some* truth to it. I know in my own faith life I have this tendency from time to time--if I’m listening to the right song, or watching the right movie, or struck by the right view of the sun setting over the hills--where a surge of faith does overwhelm any anxiety or fear I might have, and I have this brief, momentary sensation of fearlessness. In those moments, it does seem at least partly true that faith is the opposite of fear.

But the phrase returned to me yesterday as I spoke with a congregant, a congregant we will lift up in prayers today along with her family. I didn’t repeat this phrase, but it was on my mind as I was listening. And I was listening; and what I heard in her voice was both fear and faith. They were not mutually exclusive, one had not crowded out the other. Maybe it is true that at the extreme edge of fear, faith is hard to see or feel; and maybe at the extreme edge of faith, fear can dissipate. But most of our lives are not lived at those edges. Most of us go about our day navigating fears big and small, and navigating a faith that can be big or small. That phrase, that “faith is the opposite of fear” does correctly identify that there is a relationship between these two things, but it confuses or obscures how intimate one is to the other--that both fear and faith can be present at the same time.

And actually, when I think about my time at Baystate in the spring, as our fear increased so did our faith. Not in a straightforward way, to be clear. It wasn’t obvious that this is what was happening. But it was happening in the questions, and in the anger, and in the anxiety, and in the deep frustrations we were all experiencing; it was happening in the fear itself--in the fear of getting sick, in the fear of dying, in the fear of not being able to do the jobs that needed doing, in the fear of not being able to comfort a patient or a family member because of how things were changing and being disrupted so quickly. When we are angry with each other or with God or with our situation, whether we use traditional religious language or not, our prayers are burning white hot. In that sense, our faith was increasing. Our days were suddenly filled with those really big questions; “why?” overtook “how?” even in the suddenly quiet halls of the hospital. Fear and faith were walking together. And isn’t it scripture that uses the phrase, to describe faith, as having the “fear of God?” Today we know that this translation is probably a little misleading, that the

scripture is talking about being in awe of God, that a person of faith is overwhelmed by Creation. But that is not always so different, I don't think. Are we afraid of this pandemic, or in awe of it? Are we afraid of a tornado or in awe of it? Are some of us sometimes afraid of love, or of being loved, or are we in awe of love? Practically speaking, between being afraid and being in awe, is often (not always, but often) a distinction without a difference.

So maybe that is helpful for us in these awful times. Fear is one face; awe is another. But beneath them is the same substance, the same conviction, that we, by our nature, must cling to this life. Those things or feelings or events that bring us face to face with new doubts about this life, as well as those things that reassure us about this life, these may equally be the presence or the face of God in our lives, depending on what is more appropriate to our situation. When we are sick we may become fearful. That is perfectly appropriate. It is not the opposite of faith; it is faith arising, even shining, in a difficult and dark situation. And if we can name it, if we can say it to another person that "I am afraid," then we are really sharing our life with another. We are really in each other's presence when we can say to each other what is standing between us and peace.

Today we are having our Epiphany Sunday. We move our Wise Men to the manger. And we remember the story of wisdom, how it discerns the light, follows it, to witness and to bear gifts to God in our midst; the story of how wisdom sees in the night sky not only the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn, but the bright, in-breaking presence of God. Wisdom sees not only the light within us, but its content; sees its substance. Wisdom recognizes in the star above and the flame within the very same summons to attend to each other's fears. Wisdom sees that that is why the sky is lit.

Wisdom bears gifts big and small to reassure a mother and father without a room that the abundance of the sea is for them too. Wisdom looks on the distress and the loneliness and the fears of this life--of illness, of violence, of poverty--and sees which cause is right for us to take up and to defend, sees which needs should be provided for. Wisdom connects our feet to the heavens; our path on this earth will mirror the Milky Way above us. Each person will be made to shine as brightly. Sky and earth, faith and fear, are united by wisdom. And we will know, like an epiphany, that nothing is too good for us; nothing is too good for the people of Franklin County. In this season of Epiphany, let us accept the gifts of Wisdom; let us recognize that fear is a part of faith, that it too helps us see where we are called to go. And as faith answers the fears in our hearts, let our church answer the fears in our communities. Let us go as confidently toward the justice of food and housing and healthcare for all, as the Wise Men once went toward Bethlehem.

May all the people prosper in these hills, until the moon is no more.

Alleluia and amen.