

A couple of weeks ago, in my sermon, I reckoned we might all agree that the way the world is falls far short of the way it could be or should be. But we each are just one person, and so what, as followers of Jesus and lovers of God, what in the world are we to do.

A couple of weeks ago I said, we can turn to Scripture.

Fast forward to today, and the readings assigned for today, and I think perhaps I should say a little more about that, today's readings are hard. As people of the 21st century it can be really hard to see anything we might learn, when we have to wade through stories that normalize enslavement, rape, and the desire to kill – aspects of a culture long ago gone. What could we possibly learn from a people who clearly lived very differently from the way we do, and understood the world they lived in and God, very differently from the way we do.

Well, these stories, at their core, are stories of a people trying to 'figure it out.' How should we live and why, how do we find purpose and make meaning, what do we understand about God and what does that mean for lives as they're lived. We live in a very different era, but many of our questions are still the same.

The Book of Genesis, where our first reading came from, is a collection of stories preserved and edited over centuries, and passed down through the generations by the ancient Israelites. Ancient Israel was a very small nation indeed, and it was right in the middle of a region of super powers: Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, and later, Persia. Because of their size and location, they lived with the recurring reality of invasion and conquest, exile, and occupation, and with the fear that their identity as a people might one day disappear altogether.

The stories in Genesis are the stories of these people.

These stories wrestle with what it means to be God's people, what it means to be in covenant with God, especially when the outlook is bleak, or when life seems to be unrelentingly hard; these are stories about the struggles of living together as a people, and about what makes these people different from the nations around them.

And these are stories about the relationship between power and fear, how fear can have folks misuse and abuse the worldly power they have. These stories reveal the trust we have in our power to force the world we want, the life we think we need to keep, so we can stay safe, comfortable, protected from danger and threat. Because then, surely, we won't be afraid.

These stories make it clear, it doesn't ever work out like that.

In our Genesis reading Sarah feels threatened, so to keep herself safe, she uses the worldly power she has to send Hagar and Ishmael away to their deaths in the wilderness. Abraham, despite being the patriarch, the one with the most actual power, does nothing to stop it, possibly fearing the consequences in his household if he doesn't go along with what Sarah wants.

By contrast, Hagar has nothing, no rights, no agency, no choice.

Unlike the other two she accepts what's happening; allowing/feeling the agony of sadness and grief because of the love she has for her son, and the despair she feels anticipating his death.

She's not all tangled up in fears of what might or could happen, fighting back against it, fighting to get some kind of control. Instead, she's present only to what's happening.

Perhaps this is why she's able to connect with God, be sustained by God's presence, receive God's promise.

Fear will always prevent us from being fully present in this way. It's noisy and distracting, and comes with so many options our brains can always find a new one to focus on. Fear of change, fear of loss, fear of discomfort and suffering, fear of the future, fear of death. Fear has us cling to whatever power we have and put it use trying to control the world we live in, and the people we share it with. Maybe then, in the future we're all tied up imagining, in the imagined future where our anxious attention is, once we're in control then it'll be good, then we won't be afraid any more.

Scripture says, no, we can't use our meagre power to control our way out of fear, to create a future we've anxiously imagined in our minds in which there'll be nothing for us to fear.

Instead, we learn, we must get free of fear, set it down by trusting in the abiding presence of God and trusting in the goodness of God's sustaining and transforming truth.

As long as worldly fears, in all the ways they show up, continue to work on our hearts and minds, as long as fear distorts our lives, keeps us obsessing about the future we want to shape and control, and distracts us from the present and the presence of God, as long as this is where we're stuck, we're kinda stuck with a world the way that it is.

If it's going to change, we, as people of faith, have got to keep learning about our relationship with fear, learning how we might through prayer, practice, and spiritual discipline, learn to break its hold on our lives by cultivating our sensitivity to God's presence.

As Christians, we turn to Jesus, we choose discipleship, because to be a disciple is to be a learner, for our whole life, we are learning, always, how to follow Jesus more faithfully and fearlessly on the Way.

In today's Gospel reading Jesus makes it very clear that we'll not get far participating in the transformation of the world if we're afraid.

Jesus' Way, having love of God and love of neighbor as the reason for living and being is incompatible with the world the way it is. Insisting on freedom and fullness of life for all will put anyone committed to Jesus' way in conflict with the systems and communities and folks who want things to stay as they are.

So Jesus has us prepare for that, has us think about fear, confront fear, teaching us to see how pointless fear is given our actual inseparability from actual true power, in God. And our ancient stories in Scripture are the bedrock of teaching that Jesus stands on, stories of the terrible harms done, the countless mistakes made, the lives lost because of the way that fear distorts the human heart and mind, and can be so terribly connected to the abuse of worldly power.

Fear will keep us enslaved. Fear tells us we'll be safe when we're in control, but fear can't deliver on that promise, if we cleave to fear we will never be free.

The life of learning, of discipleship, the journey out of fear and toward union with God is an ancient story told again and again in Scripture. This story was given actual flesh and blood in Jesus, and now today, it's given shape and form in this world through us.

We are the chapter being written, what'll be the story we're leaving for those who come after us, what'll be the story of our time they might engage with and learn from?

Maybe it'll be a story of a community of folks who committed to learn, together, figure it out together, practice together, however imperfectly, to be present to God, and so to trust in God's presence to sustain and transform, maybe it's be a story about folks who learned together how to refuse to let their future be shaped by fear, and instead learned to live in the present and allow the future to belong to God.