

Alive: Spirit of Peace

John 14:25-27

Jody Slaughter

I shared with you at the beginning of this service about my grandmother reminding me when I heard a noise in her old house that made me feel afraid, I could just go to the sound and find out what it was. Even though those words I heard from my grandmother remind me to be curious about those things that cause me fear, I find myself feeling afraid more often than not these days. And sometimes there is good reason to feel afraid and make sure we are safe; other times the fear proves to be irrational and finding the explanation brings peace alongside our fear.

For example, have you ever smelled something burning while in your house? Feeling afraid, you search and find that your neighbor is burning leaves and tree limbs...you then feel peace in knowing all is well in your home. Or, you find there truly is something burning in your house and you call the fire department and get to safety?

In our text today Jesus was talking with his disciples. It was right before he was arrested and crucified. The disciples most certainly were feeling afraid. These are the words Jesus said to them at that point in time from John 14:25-27(NIV)

²⁵“All this I have spoken while still with you. ²⁶But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. ²⁷Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”

This is the Word of God, for the people of God.
Thanks be to God.

When I read these words from the Gospel of John, I think about how my grandmother came alongside me when I was afraid, and Jesus came alongside the disciples with his words about the Holy Spirit and peace.

The disciples had valid reasons to be afraid. Both Jesus and His disciples lives were being threatened because of Jesus' teachings about peace and how he spent time with many outcasts of society which threatened the religious system of the day.

So, it makes me think about valid reasons we have to be afraid in our world today. Especially when we take a stand for what is most equitable, life-giving and loving for all God's creation. I don't believe it's necessary to list all the reasons for rational fear in our world...we are all too familiar with these fears today. But I will say, I was recently planning to attend a peaceful march against gun violence and sadly I chose not to because of a valid fear of gun violence. So, I wonder what Jesus' words may have provided for the disciples, and for us today in the midst of our fears?

In the disciples' fear and uncertainty, Jesus comes alongside them with some new information. All they know is that Jesus has been their leader and friend, teaching them about God's love and helping them to understand scripture. They left the life they knew before they met Him and became His disciples. Now everything they have known for 3 years is threatened and Jesus introduces them to a third part of the Trinity, which we know is the Holy Spirit, the Advocate or the helper who will teach them all things and remind them of everything Jesus has taught them. In this one verse, Jesus names the Father, Himself, and the Holy Spirit.

I wonder if this was reassuring to them, or did their fear grow at the realization they were being introduced to a new way of knowing Jesus by a “spirit” which they couldn't see and were only just now hearing about. I would like to believe it was comforting and helpful, but realistically I cannot imagine how any news felt good for them at this time. This new teaching from Jesus seems like it would be helpful in days to come, but may not have been able to be fully absorbed at that moment. It would be like someone telling you where a fire extinguisher was and how to use it all during the moments when you were in the midst of a fire. Good and necessary information, but difficult to fully absorb in the midst of it.

But, Jesus doesn't just give them this new information about the Holy Spirit by itself. He adds words about giving them peace...“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” It was as if He were saying, ‘I know you are afraid, which makes sense, and want you to know I am as close to you as your very own breath. Like the practice we did at the beginning of our time together, ‘taking a couple of deep breaths,’

which helps us return to a sense of calm and be able to actually comprehend what is being said.

This reminds me when some of our staff had a worship planning retreat about three years ago and the worship pastor of another church, Josh Gafga, taught us this breath practice. We have sought to incorporate this practice in our times of worship since then, because we experienced the way it was a unifying calming experience. Josh explained how this breath practice actually allows us to reset our nervous system through three simple deep breaths.

So, it's interesting that the Spirit is identified as breath and Jesus gives them the Holy Spirit through his breath. John 20:21-22 says Jesus said, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'. In a commentary on John from Dr. Karoline Lewis she suggests that the connection of the two gifts that Jesus gives in John 14 of the Holy Spirit and peace may help the disciples remember that when Jesus says, 'peace be with you', they will know that the Holy Spirit is within them.

Just as is with our own breath, we can't see it, but we experience what it does within our bodies to give us life. Like what we can also experience when we take three mindful breaths, resetting our nervous system. When we feel afraid or anxious, we can't think clearly or remember things well...especially if we haven't prepared ourselves before something challenging happens. Jesus was helping the disciples to prepare for what was to come, which is an ongoing message for us as followers of Jesus as well.

These words from these two verses alone can aid us today in preparing for challenging times. It's not realistic to tell ourselves not to be afraid and I don't believe that's what this scripture means 'to not be afraid'..., but when we feel afraid, just as my grandmother instructed, be curious and find out the reason for our fear, allowing someone we trust to be with us to examine if the fear is a reason to get to safety or to know if the fear is not based on truth. This is a tangible way for me to understand Jesus telling the disciples He would provide His Spirit to be with them in His absence, helping them to be calm so that they could remember and understand His teachings.

So what about for you? What happens for you when you feel afraid? Could you set an intention to be aware of your feelings, examining what you do when you feel afraid? When you do feel fear, can you be curious and examine the reason for your fear, possibly sharing it with someone you trust? You could also practice taking three deep breaths more often during the day so that you can experience clarity of mind and heart, remembering that just as your breath the Holy Spirit is with you?

My grandmother didn't tell me I shouldn't feel afraid even though she knew there was most likely an explanation for the noise I heard. She did tell me that old houses make all kinds of noises and that we could go together to see what may have caused the noise. She taught me to trust my feelings and experiences, be curious and ask questions, then make a decision based on what I learned. Jesus gave us the Holy Spirit to come alongside us, help us understand God's teachings and ourselves, guiding and empowering us to make good solid choices when we feel afraid.

We are invited into spiritual practices such as mindful breathing, prayer, meditating on God's Word, so that we will be ready when we are in the midst of fearful circumstances to be more clearly guided by the Spirit, just like if we practice knowing how to use a fire extinguisher, we will be able to think clearly and know how to use it in the midst of a fire.

I'd like to invite you now to think about a fear you're aware of during this time...and where you feel it in your body...no judgement no shame, just an awareness...

Now let's take three deep breaths, allowing ourselves to be aware of the Spirit within us to help us to take peaceful steps to safety or to know we already are safe.