

John 6: 1-21 2012  
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### Letting Go

These feel like dangerous and troubled times and people are caught up in fear and anxiety. For many it feels as though a way of life that has been a birthright for generations is under constant threat. On the surface, life plods along, just as it should.

This fearfulness is held at a fragile arm's length away by going about the ordinary business of life. People go to work, have dinner with friends, observe national holidays, and in the midst of it all, people pray and pray that somehow God will intervene and this difficult time will end.

Does this sound familiar? I could perhaps be talking about the times in which now live, but I've actually just described the situation in Palestine as Jesus was making his way to Jerusalem for Passover.

Then as now, in the midst of our own deeply troubled times, Jesus stands before the hungry multitude in a world often starved of peace by war, fear, oppression and hopelessness. And he offers us the bread that gives life. Today we hear the good news that Jesus feeds us in both *body* and *soul*. He dramatically demonstrates that his power and grace transcend our limited understanding and that God's abundance always out measures scarcity.

John offers us this story of the feeding of the multitude as an authentic sign to true believers that he is the Christ, the holy one of God. Those with eyes to see know that more than a prophet is in their midst and that the world is in fact forever changed.

But for those blinded by fear and hungry for deliverance from those fears, well they begin to imagine Jesus as the return of a warrior king like David; a king who can restore the status quo and free them from Roman oppression.

Jesus offers us what we need. But, living out of places of fear and anxiety we are often blind to what we really need and become lost instead in what *we think we want*.

This gospel does more than simply witness to God's unbounded abundance and grace. -----It also offers us a cautionary note and demonstrates the difficulty we often have in receiving Jesus' gifts on his terms.

Jesus comes to us with a message of hope. But, if we remain transfixed by our fears we are in great danger of falling into despair and turning a dark and foreboding eye on the world in which we live as well as on the others with whom we share it.

Today Jesus' gift of food and the offer of his grace, provide the crowd with a glimpse of his true nature and message, but in attempting to forcibly take him and make him king, they seek only to have his power serve their own purposes--- which is simply to relieve their fear driven anxiety.

Their desire to make Jesus king is to judge him according to broken human standards---standards that often put a far greater value on retribution than on mercy.

But when Jesus withdraws from the crowd, he demonstrates that he offers his gift of grace without issuing a claim to worldly power. ----- The irony here is that they want Jesus to become a mirror reflection of the very kind of power that currently drives their own fear.

The crowd cannot seem to grasp that the true glory of God has nothing to do with worldly power. It seems that they, like us in our own anxious times, want immediate and definitive action—even violent action, rather than risking to trust that God is alive and at work in our troubled world.

What is behind our driving and often inexplicable desire to put aside the true nature of our merciful God and attempt instead to wrestle the control of the world back into our own incapable hands?

I believe that there is an old and deep fear that drives our almost inescapable need for control. The fear that I'm referring to is born from the dark and threatening suspicion that life is utterly unpredictable and unstable and that danger is around every corner.

Now, in response to what I've just said, many of us, including myself, might want to say, "that's not how I feel, I feel just fine." But I'm not talking about our surface feelings. On the shiny surfaces of our lives, the messages of our culture allow us to weave the illusion of control.

These are the messages that bombard us in the media and tell us that prestige, knowledge, wealth, influence, military might or nation can create a safety zone that protects us from vulnerability.

But, when we are faced with events like the death of a loved one, the loss of our livelihood, a threat to our health or the chaos of natural or manmade disasters, our carefully contrived illusions of control become unraveled---these slumbering primal fears are released from their nighttime prison and begin to have power over us even in the bright light of day.

These are the times in our lives that try us. These are the times that we often become consistently anxious and angry and these times find us grasping wildly to regain control-----control *even* over God. \*\*\*\*\*

In times of crisis the God we seek is often that all-powerful puppet master who controls the universe without regard for the gift of free will---or in some instances --a God whose omnipotence relieves *us* of taking any responsibility for the conditions in which we sometimes find ourselves.

This is the only kind of God that we think can restore to us the safety we crave. In this misshapen understanding of God--we lay the death of babies, the suffering from natural disasters, or the pain of hunger at God's feet. Fear and anxiety drives us to unspeakable images of God.

But Jesus shows us the *true* nature of God. Jesus teaches us again and again that God's greatest desire for us is joy and peace---both of which far surpass their paler imitations, which we call happiness and absence of conflict.

Happiness and absence of conflict are fleeting, transitory things---God's joy and peace on the other hand are a bedrock foundation on which we can stand even in the midst of our most trying and painful times.

Jesus teaches us how to navigate the fractious human condition without resorting to denial, vengeance or violence---even in the midst of deeply troubled times. He teaches us to put away our fears and our need for control and hold instead to God's promise of hope. Jesus tells us in the gospels time and time again, "Be not afraid!"

Many of you have heard me say that, "the opposite of faith is not doubt, but fear." When Jesus tells us not to be afraid, the implication isn't that our faith somehow makes us invulnerable; the Gospel is not an insurance policy that protects us from tragedy." But Jesus shows us that our human vulnerability isn't a source of panic.

By his very life he teaches us that our vulnerability is the very thing that opens our eyes TO the true nature of God. He charts the way through fear for all of us and demonstrates time and again that vulnerability is a threshold over which we can step into greater compassion, understanding and peace.

Our own vulnerability can be the very thing that opens our hearts to receive God's compassion and mercy. Vulnerability is *precisely* that which enables us to be transformed by God's grace.

So, wherever our fear or anxiety resides---be it over the state of the world, or some trying issue in our personal lives---Jesus asks us to put away our fear---to put away our fear and trust that the true will of God can never be thwarted by the vagaries of humanity's brokenness. Jesus stands before us now and says again to each of us, "Be---not--- afraid."

Yes, these are dangerous and troubled times. Then as now, Jesus stands before the hungry multitude in a fractious world and he offers himself as the bread that gives life.

This is an extraordinary reality that is most often hard for us to grasp. But time and again he shows us that the way through our deepest fear is to let it go once and for all. And as our hands release this stranglehold on fear, they fall wide open; perfectly poised to receive the true bread of life. Amen.