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“The Death of Fear and the Birth of Faith”

John 3:1-21; 36

Jan 17, 2010

The Sanctuary Downtown

Video clip from *Apocalypto*

[The movie takes place in Guatemala during the protohistoric period A.D. 1511 and depicts the journey of a Mesoamerican tribesman who must escape human sacrifice and rescue his family after the capture and destruction of his village. The scene opens to show a man, named Flint Sky, in a loincloth, with hair tied back, being held face down and arms tied by several other tribesmen wearing loincloths with their hair tied up in elaborately tall pony tails. They are speaking in another language, so a translation shows up in English at the bottom of the page.]

[The scene opens with a tribe of people moving quietly through the jungle]

Tribesman: *Our lands were ravaged. We seek a new beginning.*

[Another tribesman picks up a dead animal by him and they turn to move on.]

Jaguar paw: *Your lands were ravaged?*

Tribesman: *Yes... We seek a new beginning . . . (he bends under foliage and moves on after his tribe.)*

[Jaguar Paw, a young man from the opposite tribe starts to run after them.]

Flint Sky: *Be Still!*

[He turns to keep running.]

Flint Sky: *My son! (He turns back.) Be still.*

[Jaguar Paw turns around , takes a few steps toward his father, and stares as they turn to walk away.]

Flint Sky: *Back to the village.*

[Jaguar Paw looks back at the other tribesmen moving out among the trees, then back to his own tribesmen, one of whom is squatting down watching him. He looks down and moves off. Images are shown of monkeys barking, and tribesmen carrying meat on poles down a path towards water and the mountains.]

Flint Sky: *You are troubled. [They stop to talk as the rest walk past them.]*

Jaguar Paw: *Yes, I am.*

Flint Sky: *Those people in the forest, what did you see on them?*

Jaguar Paw: *I do not understand.*

Flint Sky: *Fear. Deep rotting fear. They were infected by it. Did you see? Fear is a sickness. It will crawl into the soul of anyone who engages it. It has tainted your peace already. I did not raise you to see you live with fear. Strike it from your heart. Do not bring it into our village.*

That was the start of Mel Gibson’s last movie, *Apocalypto*. “*Apocalypto*” is a Greek word... a Biblical word meaning “to reveal.”

I kept thinking about that clip all last week after Dee Dee and Randy gave the budget presentation. Our budget needs are hardly *apocalyptic* – I think we’re fine. We just need to trim our spending and increase our giving, or we’ll run out of cash next summer. But Dee Dee and Randy concluded by saying, “Let’s fast from fear.” Then Wednesday, a **real** crisis: The quake hit Haiti, and I kept thinking of *Apocalypto* ... Revelation.

In that scene, Jaguar Paw, his father, and his tribe are hunting in a forest, reminiscent of Eden, when they encounter a group of people fleeing from devastation at the hands of the Mayan Empire. On the way back to the village, the father stops Jaguar Paw (the son) and says, "What you saw on their faces was fear ... deep, rotting fear. Fear is a sickness. It will crawl into the soul of anyone who engages it. It has tainted your peace already... Do not bring it into the village."

Sometimes I've brought it into the village. I don't want us to bring it into the village. Fear is a prison that travels with you. In the movie clip, the people in the woods are running from devastation, yet they carry the devastation with them in their hearts through fear. They sought a new beginning, but carried with them a prison from their past called fear.

In I John 4:18, John writes, "*Fear has to do with punishment.*" Or more accurately, "*Fear has punishment; Fear contains punishment in itself.*" In the most respected dictionary of New Testament theology, J. Schneider writes, "This means that the man who lives in fear (before God) is already punished by this fear. His fear is punishment. This thought may be linked to John 3:18."

John 3:18 states that the unbeliever is condemned already. That is, trapped in a prison of fear already. Fear paralyzes the heart, traps you in yourself, keeps you from living **now**, and even motivates the self to self-destruction and all sorts of evil.

When I was a youth pastor 25 years ago, at the end of most youth meetings, all the guys would engage in rampant wedgie wars, where the goal was to rip another guy's underwear over his head and right off his body, and then use the elastic strap for a head band like Johnny Rambo. I know ... I should probably be in prison.

Well, I remember, one night, a wedgie war broke out in the church van. Brendan Bluestein (he's a Christian therapist now – a great kid) started screaming in fear, and **wedged himself**. I watched as he literally ripped his underwear over his head and off his body, so no one else could do it for him.

Fear does that.

Over the years, I've counseled with folks who are tempted to suicide. I'm always amazed to discover that almost always; we're tempted to kill ourselves because we're so afraid to die. Like the fear of death is worse than death. Scripture says that Satan keeps us in "lifelong bondage" through the "fear of death." Well, you can't kill the self with the self, for it's just more self. Try, and you sink deeper into a prison of fear that is your self – the Prison of Self.

In 1972, Soichi Yokoi emerged from a cave in a remote area of Guam. He had been there since 1944, living on frogs, rats, and vermin. He only came out at night, for fear of the Americans. For 28 years, he lived in a dark hell hole, and for 27 years, the war had been over.

Isaiah 40:2 – *Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that the warfare is over – that here iniquity is pardoned.* Well, if you didn't get that good news, Jerusalem, you'd be trapped in a prison of fear like Soichi Yokoi... war over, forgiven, redeemed, and yet still imprisoned in darkness by fear.

This world runs on fear. We're all terrorists that fight terror with terror. This world runs on threats and fear – governments, institutions, and families. Covetousness, lust, greed, jealousy, rage – I think they're

all a form of fear. The world runs on fear. **We** run on fear: fear of not getting what we want, fear of losing what we have, [*missing from notes*].

I think many (probably most) people, on an unconscious, unexamined level, think that fear is the only motive that there is. So, if they weren't motivated by fear, they wouldn't be motivated at all. And maybe my greatest fear is the loss of fear, because the loss of all fear feels like the loss of me.

Who would I be without fear?

Would I ever write a sermon again if I wasn't afraid of what would happen if I didn't?

Fear for me, and me is fear, hiding in trees like Adam and Eve. In a prison of fear, they listened to the Snake and let fear into the village, because they lacked faith in God to make them in His image.

Scripture says, "*Apart from faith, it's impossible to please God.*" Richard Rohr writes, "The greatest enemy of faith is not doubt. The greatest enemy of faith is fear." Soren Kierkegaard wrote, "The opposite of sin is not virtue, but faith." So I think the opposite of faith is fear. So fear is sin ... or very, very close to sin.

366 times in Scripture, we read, "*Fear not.*" 366 – One for each day of the year, and leap year.

Now, I know what you're thinking: "Fear of God is the beginning of wisdom." That's true. But maybe it's the **beginning** of wisdom, because all we are is fear ... so that's all God has to work with in the beginning.

For John (at least the way he uses the word "fear") fear is faithlessness, and God is in the business of casting it out. But now, how do you cast out fear? With just more fear? Maybe you can get someone's attention with fear, but you need something else to cast it out. So it's like God our Father says,

"Hey, you little bundle of fear ... fear me! Fear me! Fear me! Only me! If you must sin, sin against me! Fear me! See me! And **now** I have something to show you ... revelation."

Well, you can't cast out fear with fear.

In other words, you can't escape from hell with fear.

In other words, you can't build faith with fear.

How could fear of fear make you less afraid? I think that's why the father says to his son in the movie, "Fear will crawl into the soul of anyone that engages it." To fight fear with fear is just more fear.

Someone sent me an actual announcement in a church bulletin. It read like this:

"Don't let worry kill you. Let the church help."

For 2000 years (and especially since the 4th century, when the church was conscripted by Rome), the institutional church has tried to build faith with fear. So, the Good News has become a threat: Do this or else. *Evangelion*, where we get the term "Evangelical", means "good news." Yet, most people don't think, "Good news! Here come those evangelicals!" People no longer see John 3:16 as good news, but a

threat: *"For God so loved the world, He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life."*

For then we evangelicals say, "So you better believe (trust) His love for you. Because if you do trust His love, heaven is your reward. And if you don't trust His love, he'll torture you forever without end, because He really doesn't love you, because you didn't believe that He does. It's a test," we say. "So if you're smart enough and good enough, you'll pass the test. You'll choose to believe, but if not, you'll forever die. Good News ... *Evangelion* ... we proclaim **a test!**"

When I was a kid the announcement of a test never came as good news, but always fear.

Well, in John chapter 3, Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night. See, I think he's afraid. He's afraid for himself, and he's afraid of God. He's a Pharisee, and Pharisees knew there is a test. If anyone worked hard enough to pass it, it would be one of them. And let me say, they worked hard at faith. They knew Proverbs 3:5 – *"Trust in the Lord with all your heart."* They knew that if you trust someone, you will obey that someone. So they were desperately trying to trust and obey in fear.

John 3 – *Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."*

When my firstborn was born, I had so many wild thoughts and feelings. I told you some last week. One of which was, "Dang! Getting born must be terrifying!" Getting born is facing your fears – the death of all you trust, and the birth of new trust. Yet after Jon was cleaned up and calmed won and lying in my arms, I had another feeling ... Jealousy.

I remember thinking, "Wow, what if I was born again? What if I was born when I was old? I was 27 years old at the time. If I was born when I was 27, I'd have a 27-year jump on my competition.

I'd like, totally ace first grade.

I wouldn't let the bullies at the bus stop get me down ... I'd get **them** down.

I would be a much more impressive me.

At 27 years old, instead of 27 years of me, there'd be 54 years of me.

Instead of impressing junior high girls with burps, I'd be mature enough to impress them with poetry.

Instead of a crude and unrefined arrogance, I'd develop a sophisticated and subtle form of pride.

Instead of lifting weights and acting cool to cover my insecurities and fears, I could preach a sermon that would make people cry.

I could cover my fears with good deeds seen by men, and I could avoid mistakes and make a much more magnificent me.

I could have a much better shot at passing life's tests and getting **me** into God's Kingdom.

For certainly God would be impressed with the more magnificent me... ME!

But what if the trouble with me IS me? Then the more me tried to save me, the more lost I'd get.

If me is a prison of fear, the more I justified me, defended me, fortified me, the more I'd condemn "me", and build my own prison of fear. I don't need reincarnation; I need a new me. And "me" can't create a new me, especially with more me. If the trouble with me is me, simply being "born again," "born when I'm old," would only make things worse... me worse.

Well, Jesus didn't actually say "Born again." He said, "Born *anōthen*." Not just "again," but born **from above**. And He didn't really say "born from above," but "*genao* from above." That is, "begotten from above." Like we said last time, a believer has been "begotten again," and is waiting to be born. "Begotten from above." Not more of me, but something else. Maybe even someone else.

Begotten in me, growing in me, about to be born as me – a new me, the real me, the eternal me.

Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

It's not simply physicality, and yet I think it is a principal inherent in my physical body. The problem isn't that my flesh feels pain, it's that my flesh only feels its **own** pain. And it's not that my flesh feels pleasure, it's that it only feels its **own** pleasure. It's not that my flesh enjoys pizza. It's that my flesh only enjoys its **own** pizza, even while others starve. The one place that my flesh actually begins to feel the pain and pleasure in another's flesh is in sexual communion. And that's why sexuality is **sacred**.

My flesh is a prison unto itself. It's the me that I make with me. Me only gives birth to more me. It's a prison of me. And to be honest, all my fears are about me. Losing me. Even my fears for others are really about me. I'm afraid that me can't save them, for I assume that "me" is the savior. Me is my fragile ego, my pride, my old man. All my fears are about me, and yet all my troubles **are** me. And because I'm so afraid to lose me, I try to save me with me. In other words, with fear I try to have faith, but that faith is fear. With sin, I try to be righteous, but that righteousness is sin.

"What's born of the flesh is flesh, and what's born of the Spirit is spirit." I control flesh, but I can't control spirit; it blows where it wills. But when that spirit cries "Abba Father" in me, it's "Faith, Hope, and Love" in me. It's the Spirit of God begotten in me. It's the only begotten, begotten in me. It's Faith begotten in this land of fear.

I can't give birth to spirit with flesh. I can't give birth to faith with fear. But the Faithful One can give birth to faith in me. Faith born in a prison of fear – faith in me – is Jesus begotten in me.

Verse 8 – *"... So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."* Nicodemus said to him, *"How can these things be?"* Jesus answered him, *"Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?"*

Jesus doesn't seem too concerned with guarding Nicodemus's ego. Perhaps that's because it's His prison, and faith in himself is fear ... his prison of fear.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven, but only he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

Aionios Life ... Life of the Age. God's Age. The promised rest. God's land. But talk about weird stories. Jesus refers to an incident that happened to the Israelites on the way to the Promised Land in Numbers 21.

The Israelites are filled with fear – fear that they might die. Their fear is faith in themselves. It's flesh. Ad so they complain to themselves about God. God seems to be fine when we complain to him about him. When we speak our fears to him. But when we complain to ourselves, we make a prison of ourselves, and hide our hearts in darkness.

In Numbers 21, God sends snakes into that darkness, and they bite the Israelites right in their unfaithfulness and fear ... their flesh.

You know, fear is faith in the evil one, and John says the whole world is under the power of the evil one. And the evil one is a snake. Our fears make a sanctuary for snakes. Faithlessness is the abode of snakes and demons, and in my experience, God will let them bite in order to chase us from the darkness into the Light.

He sent snakes and then the people came to Moses and surrendered their sin... surrendered themselves and cried out, “Save us!” Then God had Moses make a bronze serpent and lift it on a pole. Then all the people had to do was look at it, and they were healed! Healed, not just of snake bites, but faithless fear. See, their greatest fear was not snakes. Their greatest fear was God. Fear that He isn't good. Fear that He doesn't conquer. And God used snakes to smoke them out. He used little fears to reveal the greatest fear – the judgment of God.

God said, “Hey, you bundle of fear ... fear me. See me. For now I have something to show you.” A revelation. God made them face their fears and then He gave them faith. They didn't have to say anything, do anything, and accomplish anything. They only had to see it, and they lived. It wasn't a test, the way we define “test.” Not a test, a revelation. An apocalypse. And it set them free.

“In the same way,” says Jesus, “the Son of Man must be lifted up.” You know, according to Scripture, the whole world is snake bit and dying. And we're snake bit because we trusted the snake and trusted ourselves. We tried to save ourselves, make ourselves, and justify ourselves. Adam and Eve took the fruit and hid themselves in fear. They hid themselves in the trees with the snake. The problem is faithlessness, which is fear. Fear for me.

So God allows the snakes to bit me in my me ... my old me. My flesh. Snakes like addictions, afflictions, demons, and sins. He even sends them, so that we'd cry out, “Yeshua God [?] Jesus.” And then and there ... He gives the Revelation. The Apocalypse is not snakes or the end of the world. The apocalypse is Him ... His heart lifted up for me and for all to see. Maybe “Jesus Christ and Him crucified” is not a test to see if we could believe (as if God doesn't know). Maybe “Jesus Christ and Him crucified” is not a test

to see if we could believe, but a revelation so that **we would** believe. Not a test to fill us with fear, but a test that burns away fear and purifies faith. Like fire burns away dross and purifies gold.

A revelation, an unveiling, an apocalypse of faith in the midst of fear.

In the movie *Apocalypto*, this is the revelation that fills Jaguar Paw with faith, which conquers the Mayan Empire and makes a new beginning.

Video clip from *Apocalypto*

Middle Eye: *Stand him up.*

[The two holding him pull him up by the arms as Middle Eye turns to look at a kneeling man, Jaguar Paw, being held by another tribesman.]

Middle Eye: *(Stands and moves towards the two men holding Flint Sky.) Move away.*

[The two guards step back and Middle Eye steps towards Flint Sky and snatches his necklace off. The two prisoners look at each other and breathe. Middle Eye throws the necklace on the ground in front of Jaguar Paw, who looks down at it.]

Flint Sky: *My son (smiles gently).*

Jaguar Paw: *(looks up)*

Middle Eye: *(puts a knife to the throat of the standing prisoner.)*

Flint Sky: *Don't be afraid*

[The scene closes with Middle Eye turning to move the knife.]

He watches his father bear his worst fear and then die with faith. Do you see, that is just a distant shadow of the revelation that is given to you in this fallen world? For actually, there was a test, but we already failed the test long ago in a garden. We failed the test because we lacked faith. (I suggest we never had it.) We failed the test, so we're already snake bit and dying. And yet with this fallen world full of snakes, God smokes us out of hiding and into His presence, saying, "Hey you bundle of fear... fear me. Fear me. Look at me. Now (at the right time), I have something to show you."

Jesus said, "If you've seen me, you've seen the Father." That's the Creator. Lifted on a cross, we watch him bear our fears and die in faith. We face our fears, for He bears our fears. The snake hid in our darkness, and when it bit us, it bit Him. When I look to the cross, I see me – my old me – dying in Him. I see me and receive the revelation of Him – the Apocalypse, that God is love, faithful Love, unquenchable Love, perfect Love. Perfect Love that casts out fear.

Jesus is not the snake, and yet He was snake bit for us. "*He who knew no sin became sin that we might become the righteousness of God.*" When I really see Him – Perfect Love – fear dies. Because we feared Him, we crucified Him. But when we crucified Him, He cast out fear. The Creator and Sustainer ... the All-Powerful ... my Father [?] Love.

Fear is the beginning of wisdom, but Jesus is wisdom, and the death of fear... my old me. He is the revelation of perfect Love. 1 John 4:17 - *By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the Day of Judgment (the day I stand before Him), because as he is so also are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear (God casts out fear – the old me that I thought was me). For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love.*

We love because he first loved us (Fearless Love is the image of God... the death of old me and the birth of He – Jesus in me).

Jesus in me. “Faith, hope, and Love” in me is Jesus in me. The new me, begotten in old me. The life of God in me.

Now listen to the next verse in John, John 3:16.

For God so loved the world (the **world**, not some of the world ... the world) *that he gave his only Son...* (Only begotten son. So if you are begotten from above, it’s only because the only begotten is begotten within you)

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only (begotten) Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish (be perished, be lost) but have eternal life. Aionios life, His life, His age.

Literally, in Greek, “He gave His only begotten son, so that all the one believing (*pisteou*) in him should not be perished (*apollumi*) ... not be lost, but have *aionios* life ... life of the age.”

God’s age. God’s kingdom.

God gave His only begotten Son not to see **if** we could believe.

God gave His only begotten Son **so that** we **would** believe.

Eternal life is not the reward for believing.

Eternal life **is** believing.

Faith is not the requirement for heaven.

Faith is the substance of heaven.

Perishing (lostness) is not the penalty for unbelief.

It **is** unbelief. It’s a prison of fear.

For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn (judge) the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him. Whoever believes in Him is not condemned (judged), but whoever does not believe is condemned (judged) already, because he has not believed (trusted) in the name of the only (begotten) Son of God.

“Condemned already.” Before you believed, you were “condemned already,” and whatever in you doesn’t believe is “condemned right now.”

John 3:36 – *Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.*

Heaven and Hell begin in this world. Until you trust the Son, you’re under wrath, and “condemned already.” It’s not the threat of damnation; it is damnation already, your prison of fear.

And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.

Whenever I'm afraid, I'm guarding works of wickedness. That is, my [?], my flesh, my old man. See, my old man is very fragile. He's built with lies, and so I fear for him and try to defend him. And my greatest fear is God, for I fear that God is the death of me (my old man). In other words, my greatest fear is the death of fear, for I think that fear **is** me. But the death of fear is the birth of faith. The death of old me is the birth of new me – Jesus in me.

But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.

“Seen that it's not me – it's **He** at work in me.” The new me, the free me. Not fragile, but eternal, indestructible, imperishable, and always good. God so loved the world that He gave His “only begotten Son” so that you would be begotten from above. That's not a threat or a test to fill you with fear. That's the revelation of God to drive out fear and fill you with faith. That's the proclamation of the Gospel – the Good news.

That God so loved He gave Himself. He took bread and broke it, saying: “This is My Body, broken and given to you.” And He took the cup, saying: “This is the New Covenant in My blood. Eat and drink.”

He subjected all creation to futility and disobedience in order that His children could see this: Perfect Love that casts out fear and gives birth to faith. Gives birth to new men and women in the image of God.

Nicodemus came by night, yet Jesus had descended into Nicodemus's night of fear. Nicodemus couldn't see, but then He did see. In John 19, it's Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimethea that come in the light for all to see. They come for the broken body of Jesus. They see Jesus lifted up on a pole for the sins of the world. They take the broken body of Jesus and place it in the tomb—their tomb.

Come to the table and place Jesus in your tomb ... your prison of fear. Surrender your fears and receive His faith.

[Communion]

[Benediction]