

“Fear and Trembling”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

As we continue to journey into an unknown “new normal” during this pandemic, Paul’s words, “*work out your own salvation with fear and trembling*” have been on my mind. These words are perhaps also a reference to Psalm 55:4-5, “*My heart is in anguish within me, the terrors of death have fallen upon me. Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me.*” There is a lot of “fear and trembling” in the world right now. The easy confidence of just a few months ago seems to have been replaced with anxiety, caution, and fear.

The phrase “*fear and trembling*” is also the title of Søren Kierkegaard’s well-known book, published in 1843. In this work, Kierkegaard takes up the story of Abraham and Isaac (Genesis 22:1-19), focusing on Abraham’s faith. Abraham faithfully answered the call to sacrifice Isaac, and was saved from doing so by God’s grace. Abraham received back his son, and his covenantal promise with God was renewed. For Kierkegaard, this is a story about faith as a response to God’s call, which will always contain “fear and trembling.”

Kierkegaard was concerned about the life of faith as a living and dynamic trust in God. Faith is not simply intellectual assent to a creed or body of doctrine; rather, faith is lived out daily with “fear and trembling.” For Kierkegaard, faith is a “leap” that believers make from a rational world that “makes sense” into the infinity and eternity of God, which they cannot see, but trust is present with them. Through faith, the believer comes into absolute relationship with the absolute.

Kierkegaard imagined what such a call must have felt like for Abraham. Abraham and Sarah had been given a precious son, Isaac, and now God was asking Abraham to kill, essentially murder, Isaac. The ethical dimensions of this summons from God are, of course, frightening. Abraham must have been filled with “anguish” and “dread” – with fear and trembling – at the thought of killing his beloved son. Kierkegaard argued that people exonerate Abraham’s faith too quickly, turning it into a “virtue,” rather than noticing fear and trembling as the way faith is worked out in human life.

Kierkegaard was concerned about faith within modern existence. After the Enlightenment, rationalism and the emergence of modern scientific methodology left little room for faith. Through faith, Kierkegaard sought to regain the interiority of human existence that had been lost in the Enlightenment. Kierkegaard was very critical of Hegel’s “System” that had made Christianity into a philosophy by rationalizing faith and the movement of the Holy Spirit in history. Kierkegaard sought to restore the immediacy and power of the experience of faith in the everyday of human existence, and looked to Abraham as an example of faith that modern people could understand.

*Fear and Trembling* is a work of biblical exegesis, philosophy, and theology. It is a challenging book that gives back as much as one is willing to invest in it, which is to say, it is not an easy read. However, time has proven Kierkegaard correct about faith in the modern world. The relationship between faith and reason is ongoing for modern people; it is never one or the other, rather the integration of faith and reason is the goal. Faith begins at the limits of reason, where it is

experienced in fear and trembling, allowing one to struggle with questions of existence that are both ethical and immediate.

In Abraham, Kierkegaard saw the “dread” and “anguish” that must have existed within him as he traveled to the land of Moriah with Isaac. Abraham trusted that God would provide, but such trust was also accompanied with fear and trembling. For Kierkegaard, faith is revealed as the believer has “resignation” before God in the face of the absurdity, unfairness, and complexity of everyday existence. Resignation is the realization that as we wait upon God’s grace, as we wait upon guidance in ethical matters, as we wait upon forgiveness, we stand before an absolute God in the absoluteness of faith.

Kierkegaard described faith as a “leap” on a springboard or trampoline that propels one into the infinity or eternity of God. Rational thinking does not allow this freedom, and therefore, for Kierkegaard, faith is the most powerful and liberating aspect of human interiority. The act of absolute faith propels each person into a relationship with an infinitely loving and graceful God.

Many of us can probably identify with the words “fear and trembling.” Recent events in the world, be they related to the pandemic, economic uncertainty, or the absurdity of human cruelty, remind us of how high the stakes are in human life for each of us. In Philippians (2:1-13), Paul writes of Christ’s own self-emptying as the way in which Christ chose to be known in the world, as the suffering servant. Christ became a servant so humanity might see the redemptive nature of suffering and servanthood. Paul reminded the Philippians of God’s presence: “*it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*” This willing and working for God’s good pleasure is the way each person must work out salvation with fear and trembling.

It is no easy task to discern God’s will about *how* we are to “will and work” in the world each day. Such discernment requires us to walk closely with Jesus in prayer, and in conversation with one another, as we seek God’s guidance in the midst of today’s fears and challenges. This is where “fear and trembling” occur, because like Abraham, we don’t know how things will turn out. We trust absolutely that God will provide absolute grace, but working this out is never easy.

As our nation and its communities talk about “re-opening,” many are fearful for the future. There is, as yet, no vaccine or cure for this pandemic. We long for a return to familiar patterns, and we are also perhaps fearful, because many of the new patterns for daily life are patterns *we will have to make, test, and implement as a society*, this involves great risk. As a pastor, I long for the familiar patterns of church life, but I also realize that “re-gathering” as the church will need new patterns that are safe for life during a pandemic. This causes us no small amount of “fear and trembling” as we seek God’s grace to guide us into safe and meaningful ways to be the church together.

Psalms 55:22 reads, “*Cast your burdens on the Lord, and he will sustain you.*” This is a description of the life of faith. Who would you be without faith? Believing - placing our burdens, fears and trembling upon the absolute mercy of God – helps create us as individuals. With fear and trembling, cast your burdens on the Lord, in doing so you will see beyond the horizon of yourself, and into the infinite grace of God. God will sustain you with courage to see into the horizons of others, so that you might live for them. It is for this we have been given the grace of faith. Amen.

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**Easter Week 7 midweek meditation reading: Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855)**

Excerpts from *Fear and Trembling*

Today nobody will stop with faith; they all go further.<sup>1</sup> It would perhaps be rash to inquire where to, but surely a mark of urbanity and good breeding on my part to assume that in fact everyone does indeed have faith, otherwise it would be odd to talk of going further. In those old days it was different. For then faith was a task for a whole lifetime, not a skill thought to be acquired in either days or weeks. When the old campaigner approached the end, had fought the good fight, and kept his faith, his heart was still young enough not to have forgotten the fear and trembling that disciplined his youth and which, although the grown man mastered it, no man altogether outgrows – unless he somehow manages at the earliest possible opportunity to go further. Where these venerable figures arrived, our own age begins, in order to go no further...

But Abraham had faith, and had faith for *this* life. Yes, had his faith only been for a future life it would have indeed been easier to cast everything aside in order to hasten out of this world to which he did not belong. But Abraham's faith was not of that kind, if there is such, for a faith like that is not really faith but only its remotest possibility, a faith that has some inkling of its object at the very edge of the field of vision but remains separated from it by a yawning abyss in which despair plays its pranks. But it was for this life that Abraham believed, he believed he would become old in his land, honoured among his people, blessed in his kin, eternally remembered in Isaac, the dearest in his life, whom he embraced with a love for which it was but a poor expression to say that he faithfully fulfilled the father's duty to love the son, as indeed the summons put it: 'the son whom thou lovest.'

But Abraham believed and did not doubt. He believed the absurd. If Abraham had doubted – then he would have done something else, something great and glorious; for how could Abraham have done other than what is great and glorious? He would have marched out to the mountain in Moriah, chopped the firewood, set light to the fire, drawn the knife – he would have cried out to God: 'Do not scorn this sacrifice, it is not the best I possess, that I well know; for what is an old man compared with the child of promise, but this is the best I can give. Let Isaac never come to know, that he may comfort himself in his young years.' He would have thrust the knife into his own breast. He would have been admired in the world and his name never forgotten; but it is one thing to be admired, another to be a guiding star that saves the anguished...

But what did Abraham do? He came neither too *early* nor too late. He mounted the ass, he rode slowly down the path. All along he had faith, he believed that God would not demand Isaac of him, while he was still willing to offer him if that was indeed what was demanded. He believed on the strength of the absurd, for there could be no question of human calculation, and it was indeed absurd that God who demanded this of him should in the next instant withdraw the demand. He

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<sup>1</sup> To "go further" meant moving beyond faith toward rational inquiry. The Enlightenment model of rationalism was deeply suspicious of faith, which could not be scientifically verified. By Kierkegaard's time, the limitations of pure reason were beginning to be seen, as well as the socio-cultural position of the thinking subject, which of course contains linguistic, cultural, creative, and religious dimensions beyond reason.

climbed the mountain, even in that moment when the knife gleamed he believed – that God would not demand Isaac...

It is commonly supposed that what faith produces is no work of art but a crude and vulgar effort only for clumsier natures; yet the truth is quite otherwise. The dialectic of faith is the most refined and most remarkable of all dialectics, it has an elevation that I can form a conception of but no more. I can make the great trampoline leap in which I pass over into infinitude, my back is like that of a tight-rope dancer, twisted in my childhood, and so it is easy for me. One two, three, I can go upside down in existence, but the next is beyond me, for I cannot perform the miraculous but can only be astonished by it...

Then how did Abraham exist? He had faith. That is the paradox that keeps him at the extremity and which he cannot make clear to anyone else, for the paradox is that he puts himself as the single individual in an absolute relation to the absolute. Is he justified? His justification is, once again, the paradox; for if he is the paradox it is not by virtue of being anything universal, but of being particular...

Faith is the highest passion in a human being. Many in every generation may not come that far, but none comes further. Whether there are also many who do not discover it in our own age I leave open.

#### **Book recommendations:**

Kierkegaard, Søren, *Fear and Trembling*. (Alistair Hannay), London & New York: Penguin Classics, 1985, 2014.

Kierkegaard, Søren, *Fear and Trembling*. (Sylvia Walsh translation), Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Kierkegaard, Søren, *Fear and Trembling* and *The Sickness unto Death*. (Walter Lowrie translation), Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941, 2013.

#### **Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855)**

Søren Aabye Kierkegaard was a Danish Lutheran philosopher and theologian, whose work attempted to renew the Christian faith as it struggled captive to modernism and Christendom. Kierkegaard is often called “the father of existentialism” for making the everyday the place of human struggle, the place where faith must be lived out. He was a critic of Hegel’s philosophical “System” which depersonalized the biblical God, turning faith into rational assent. Like the poet Novalis who centered upon “feeling” (*das Gefühl*), Keats who centered upon “imagination,” and Schleiermacher who centered upon “absolute dependence,” Kierkegaard sought to reclaim “faith” as the central living aspect of the human relationship with the divine that had been overshadowed in the Enlightenment. Kierkegaard revisited biblical stories showing how they could still be relevant to the questions and issues of life in the modern world. He was an outspoken critic the “Christendom” Christianity of the state church in his homeland of Denmark, which had become more about moral rectitude than about following a living call to faith with its ethical implications of fear and trembling.