

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

1st Sunday of Advent
Year A

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Text: Nahum 1:3-5/Matthew 2:1-3

Title: "Under Wraps: God is Dangerous"

(Show video clip.)

I remember scenes like that when years ago our team of volunteers took a group of senior high students to Washington, D.C., to study the problem of homelessness in America. I had worked with the seminar design leader at the UM Board of Church and Society located across from the Capital building as she put together an experience that included time in the classroom as well as an immersion experience. After spending time in the classroom learning about the issue, we were then sent usually in pairs to places that were caring for those on the street, trying to meet them where they were but help them move beyond where they were to a more stable life.

A tall, lanky, whimsical senior named Jeff and I were sent to Christ House. It was a large old home purchased by a doctor who discovered her homeless patients would be well enough to be released from the hospital and go home but without a home to go to, they did not recover well and in fact most were later readmitted shortly after their release. It was a cycle that led many to a premature death, and she felt God calling her to do something and so she started Christ House, a place homeless people could go and recover after being hospitalized.

Like the rest of our adult and youth teams, Jeff and I were given directions and bus stop information and off we went heading into a city we knew little about. We hopped on the bus and got off at the appointed stop and began walking the 6 blocks or so from the stop to Christ House. As we walked the sidewalk, people were out. It was a nice day, an active neighborhood. As we walked, we both noticed that we were the only white guys around. We were it! Jeff said to me, "So this is what it's like to be a minority person." For the first time we were conscious of the color of OUR skin and we talked about what it must be like to be a minority person in America and feel what we were feeling in that short walk to Christ House.

We arrived at Christ House and were told we would be helping prepare lunch that day for the current residents, so--after a brief introduction to the place by the nuns who ran the place--to the kitchen we went. The renovations to this old mansion-like building were obvious. The kitchen was a commercial kitchen. We were given jobs to do like peeling potatoes and carrots. After a few hours the head cook told us to begin sorting through green beans that had been donated by a local grocer. They were old and we were told: "Sort through them and snap off the bad parts and throw away the one's you wouldn't eat. Keep the rest."

So good-natured Jeff and I began sorting through the beans, talking together about not

imagining this happening in our home, rehearsing our walk through a black neighborhood and how that felt, what it might mean for us, when a petite, mid-60's nun walked into the kitchen and announced: "I need someone to throw a drunk out!"

I don't know if you've ever experienced the fear of God calling you to something for which you felt completely ill-equipped but that was one of those moments for me. Come to Christ House and you call me to "throw a drunk out!" "Come on, God! What could you possibly be thinking? I did NOT sign up for this, nor am I ready for this."

Yet, as we have stepped once again into Advent, preparing once again for the coming of the Christ, the story is clear: Jesus' coming is as much about a challenge as it is about anything else. His coming challenges expectations and turns the world upside down. Yet, we get uncomfortable when our values and our expectations are challenged. Sometimes these God-challenges are downright frightening because God can be downright dangerous. God after all is fearless. But us? Not so much! So if we are called to follow this "babe-in-a-manger God", what are we to do with the fear that comes with following such a dangerous God?

According to the biblical record we are not alone in responding with fear when our fearless God comes with a challenge. Moses was out tending his sheep when God called him to go back home to free the Hebrew slaves. "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" He was just a shepherd and he told God he wasn't equipped because he couldn't even speak very well. How could he go to the most powerful person in the land and demand the slaves be freed armed with only a staff and his speech? Not only that but Moses may have faced a murder charge which could mean going back there could lead to his death for having killed an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew. Moses had a great deal that kept him from gladly embracing God's call.

I love the old story of Jonah who, when God called him to leave home and go to Nineveh and tell them all that God was not happy with their wicked ways and wanted them to return to God, immediately buys a ticket to run away from the assignment.

And Jeremiah when God calls him to be a prophet to the nations tells God that he doesn't know how to speak because he is only a boy.

As Jesus is calling the first disciples in Luke's Gospel, he comes upon two boats on the shore of the lake. He gets into Peter's boat and asked him to push off from shore. From there he teaches the crowd and when he is finished he tells Peter to go to the deep water and let down there nets for a catch, but Peter resists saying they've been working the nets all night and caught nothing, but he nonetheless complies. And when he does what Jesus asks they have so many fish they have to call to their friends on shore to bring the other boat and help them because the catch was so great. Peter gets on his knees and tells Jesus "'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!' 10 ... Then Jesus said to Simon, 'Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.' 11 When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him." (Luke 5)

Following him though--they would discover--can be dangerous because Jesus upsets the status quo. From the beginning, his birth disturbs people like King Herod, who goes so far as to take innocent lives in the slaughter of the innocents in order to work against God's presence in the world. Jesus challenges the likes of the Pharisees and Sadducees threatening their assumptions about what it means to be a child of God. He calls the religious on their self-righteous, log-in-the-eye judgments made about other "sinners" without having made their own,

honest self-examinations. He offers grace but also correction as he angrily turns tables of money changers who are abusing the poor and using religion as a veil for the abuse. Jesus' coming brings fear and also anger because God is dangerous when challenging evil in the world. People who choose to follow Jesus have found themselves facing the same fury of fear and anger.

As a follower of Jesus, Martin Luther King, Jr., faced the kind of bitter anger and evil of hatred often expressed in violence. As a Christ follower, he refused to return violence with violence, because it leads to an endless cycle. He preached that...

The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral,
begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy.
Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it.
Through violence you may murder the liar,
but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth.
Through violence you may murder the hater,
but you do not murder hate.
In fact, violence merely increases hate.
So it goes.
Returning violence for violence multiplies violence,
adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars.
Darkness cannot drive out darkness:
only light can do that.
Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

<http://www.drmartinlutherkingjr.com/mlkquotes.htm>

In John's Gospel we hear Jesus described as the light: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:5). As the light, God's love is fearless, so fearless that he will stare down the violence of the cross and submit to it, knowing ultimately that it will not hold him for long. Love ultimately triumphs.

God is fearless which makes Jesus dangerous, dangerous because we can so often be afraid, afraid to stand up for a vulnerable person or persons if our lives or livelihoods are at stake, afraid to say yes to God when we sense God calling us to an unexpected and unwanted ministry perhaps because we feel ill-equipped, afraid when God calls us to engage in a God-sized dream that seems to stretch us far beyond our self-limiting capacities. God in Jesus is dangerous because his call and claim on our lives can raise our fears.

And yet God has a record of faithfulness. There's an old quote derived from scripture that says "God doesn't call the equipped. God equips the called." It comes through Paul's expression of faith in

9 but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power[a] is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. 10 Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am

strong (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

Paul also expresses it in his letter to the congregation in Thessaloniki, Greece:

²⁴The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this (1Thessalonians 5:24).

God tells Moses and Jonah and Jeremiah, too, that they are not alone. To the young Jeremiah, God tells him:

“Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’;
for you shall go to all to whom I send you,
and you shall speak whatever I command you.
⁸Do not be afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you,
says the LORD.”

God is fearless in Jesus and God promises over and over again to equip those who are willingly to overcome whatever fears keep them from resisting.

Jeff and I were the only ones in the kitchen besides the cook when the nun came in with her announcement: “I need someone to throw a drunk out”. The cook was busily at work flying around the kitchen trying to get lunch ready and acted as if he didn’t hear a thing. I looked at Jeff. He looked at me. We were both shocked by the request, but we reacted very differently. I was thinking, “Wait a minute, God! I’m just here to help cook! I didn’t sign up to be a bouncer! What have you gotten us into here?” I was afraid. Not Jeff. Jeff looked eager. He was ready to charge ahead and get-er-done.

Recognizing the cook wasn’t budging and there was no one else, Jeff and I followed the nun down the hallway. Because of my own inner fears, I imagined the guy could be a combative 6’6”, 300 lb. tackle from the Washington Redskins ready to clean my clock. What were the two of us going to do with a guy like that? I was also concerned because I was responsible for this teenager following me who seemed far too eager to engage this threat.

As I followed the nun, I prayed, asking God to be present, to give us what we needed to handle this situation appropriately, that no one gets hurt. The nun led us to the corridor where a sloppily drunk man a few inches taller than I am was barely standing. His body sort of weaving in his own tracks as he stood there slurring his speech which I didn’t understand because he was speaking Spanish and only Spanish. He was so drunk he could barely stand, let alone fight.

I walked up to him and told him he needed to leave, gently touching his upper right arm. He pulled away as if my index finger was a red hot branding iron, staggering as he could hardly keep his balance. Jeff got on one side of the man, and I got on the other--both of us ready to guide him to the door, when his head fell on my shoulder, his arms sloppily, half-hugging me. The man began to sob, just sob. I held him for a few moments, not really knowing how to help him, except to be human for a few moments, thinking that maybe he came to Christ House because he was looking for Jesus; even in a drunken stupor, looking for Jesus.

So when have you sensed God calling you beyond your fears? Is God challenging you to

some need in the world that feels overwhelming to you, for which you feel ill equipped and yet somehow know that it is a light-and-love-bringing call? Consider, just consider, trusting the babe-in-a-manger-dangerous God whose call and claim on your life may leave you shaking in your boots, but who also promises to equip those who are called.

Since the light has come into the world, we are invited over and over again to place our trust in the fearless God in Jesus who faces evil with the force of love that cannot be destroyed.