

Call to Worship

I heard someone say once that sometimes he confuses the feelings of hunger and thirst; that he thinks he is hungry when in fact what his body is craving is water.  
I think that happens with our emotions too. The emotion that appears on the surface is anger, or anxiety, or wanting to control things;  
when what really needs to be attended to is our fear.

There is a lot to be afraid about right now.  
There are things happening in the world that deserve our fear,  
that make us suspicious of the things we thought we could depend on,  
and of one another.

Here is what I notice about the God we worship:  
That the angels of God show up, almost every time, with the words: *Do not be afraid.*  
That those words always come just before a change—not in the order of the world but in the heart and hope of whoever it is the angel is talking to.  
That in *every* case, that person is being called to a life of more self-giving, more openness, more living at-risk for the common good.

Here's what else I notice:  
The Bible says, *Perfect love casts out fear.* It doesn't wipe out disease or guns or other people's hatred. Love defeats our *fear*.  
Maybe God thinks fear is the most dangerous thing of all.

In this moment of silence, you are invited to name your fear, and fear that might today be wearing the clothes of anger or cynicism or despair.  
See it for what it is, so that you can hold it up and let it lose its power in the face of another love, another promise.

Silence - 20 seconds  
Music underscore begins

God of both darkness and light, turn to us now. Turn your face to us.  
Because it is dark here.  
And we are in need. We are a people in need.  
We can barely remember our own truth in these days,  
and if you too have forgotten, we are really in trouble.  
Shelter us from danger.  
From sickness;  
From the danger created by other people's fear;  
From the dangers of acting out of our own fear.  
And when we falter in our confidence, and our hope, and our love—which is often—  
remind us that you will turn toward us again. That you always turn toward us.  
Amen

## *Dangerous Prayers*

From the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples:

*Forgive us our trespasses  
as we forgive those who trespass against us*

A poem by Scott Cairns, called *Possible Answers to Prayer*:

*Your petitions—though they continue to bear  
just the one signature—have been duly recorded.  
Your anxieties—despite their constant,*

*relatively narrow scope and inadvertent  
entertainment value—nonetheless serve  
to bring your person vividly to mind.*

*Your repentance—all but obscured beneath  
a burgeoning, yellow fog of frankly more  
conspicuous resentment—is sufficient.*

*Your intermittent concern for the sick,  
the suffering, the needy poor is sometimes  
recognizable to me, if not to them.*

*Your angers, your zeal, your lipsmackingly  
righteous indignation toward the many  
whose habits and sympathies offend you—*

*these must burn away before you'll apprehend  
how near I am, with what fervor I adore  
precisely these, the several who rouse your passions.*

Like every lawyer you know, I spent nine months in a class called 'Property', learning about the rights that go with ownership of land in our legal system, and how those rights get violated, and what happens when they do. It was a slog, full of arcane terms and concepts that no one is ever sure why you have to know. As much as anything, that class is the reason people hate the first year of law school.

The word *trespass* came up a lot in that class. The way it's used in the law, the word 'trespass' comes from the 13th century, out of a French word that means to "cross over". To trespass on property means to cross over it unlawfully; to knowingly enter onto property that belongs to someone else.

Before the 13th century, though, a trespass meant simply: a wrong. Any kind of wrong. This is the way translators of Jesus' prayer would have meant it: forgive us our wrongs, or our sins, if you will.

Here's another difference: in the legal definition, if you 'trespass' on someone else's property, or cross their boundary in any way, you are liable, accountable, whether you've done any damage or not. But in the way Jesus would have used the word, there's also an element of damage embedded in the idea. Trespass is an action that causes harm. It's not just a violation of rules, or laws; it's hurt someone, caused damage in some way. So really, *forgive us our trespasses* means 'forgive us for the injury we've caused.'

This week we witnessed a lot of trespassing. On Wednesday we watched an angry mob of protesters briefly take over the capital of this country. They did harm in almost every way I can think of: to persons, to property, to the dignity and identity of this nation. To watch that happen shook us to our core. You must have wondered this week, as I did, whether we were wrong when we assumed that whatever else we disagree about, Americans share a commitment to a democratic system, and a common ideal of civility and goodwill.

I imagine those protesters in Washington, DC would say that they did not trespass in the legal sense; that the Capitol building belongs to them, just like it belongs to all the people of the U.S. And maybe they'd be right about that. Our alarm, I think, should be not so much at the absence of armed guards to hold back crowds at the doors of the building where Congress works. We are a democracy. Our government buildings are open.

But in other ways our shock was well deserved:

That thousands of people would be so unwilling to accept the outcome of an election that they'd do violence, try to smash through the rest of our democracy;

That we are capable of electing to the presidency someone whose hunger for power distorts good judgment, conscientious service, anything beyond self-interest;

That an angry mob of white people brandishing guns in a federal building would be policed more gently than a black man who buys cigarettes with a counterfeit \$20 bill, or who moves his hands the wrong way on a steering wheel.

This week—actually the whole last year—has exposed an ugly truth about American values, not only in the context of our political disputes but all year as we have responded to this pandemic. We are a country of people who insist on our personal rights, our freedom to do whatever we want, even when a temporary sacrifice is necessary for the common good. We have come to think that freedom and equality and the pursuit of happiness are entitlements we hold individually, rather than a treasure we nurture for one another.

Democracy gives us the right to think this way. Democracy allows, even encourages, people to operate out of pure self-interest. It gives us the right to think and speak any way we want, every one of us. Every one of *them*.

But democracy is not the Gospel. Sometimes democracy's values overlap with the values of Christianity, but self-interest is not the way that Jesus taught, or lived, or died for. Democracy is

just our best theory. It's our flawed, risky, human attempt to create a political system that allows every person to choose their own path to flourishing, when it's working at its very best. It's the best political system we know, but it does not make us kind, or generous, or self-giving people.

We need something higher, and truer, sturdier, than either our political system or our legal system, to make us good. And today—every day, but especially today—we are followers of Jesus. The world needs that from us. Jesus who, when his first followers asked him how *he* prayed, included this sentence:

*Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.*

Some people have said that this prayer means that God cannot, will not, forgive us unless we exercise the same grace toward others. But I don't think that's what Jesus meant to suggest here. Tit-for-tat is not God's way. It would be a spiteful, small God who would say, 'If you're going to hold a grudge against your neighbor, then I'm going to do the same with you.' Our ability, or inability, to forgive does not set the limits here. God's grace is always one or two or a hundred steps beyond the stretch capacity of our hearts.

The poem we read a few minutes ago says that, in a playful, slightly sardonic way. I love this poem by Scott Cairns. I hear the voice of a God who chides us and still humors our humanity. It's God mildly, compassionately, coaxing us into seeing, and recognizing how easy it is for self-deception to sneak into our desires, our prayers—for every one of us. This is God's voice speaking in the poem:

*Your petitions—though they continue to bear  
just the one signature—have been duly recorded.*

Just the one signature: my personal concern, narrowly framed. Just like my vision is narrow, not too conscious of the longer or wider consequences of what I am asking for. I pray for *my* health, my children, my community, the people who are in my sphere of anxiety. My concerns are so much smaller than what is troubling God, maybe even trivial in comparison. But even my minor prayers, this God says, are 'duly recorded': heard, remembered, honored.

Another stanza:

*Your repentance—all but obscured beneath  
a burgeoning, yellow fog of frankly more  
conspicuous resentment—is sufficient.*

Even that little stone of resentment that sits stubbornly inside of me as I muddle toward someone who has offended me can't block the flow of God's forgiveness. God is determined to see and nurture my best intention, flickering as it may be. Whatever you can bring is enough, this God says, but don't be confused; I see you fully. It's that clarity that agitates me into honesty, maybe even toward a wider compassion. Now that you mention it, God, I can see: how hard it is for me to pray with an open heart for leaders who abuse their power and privilege; how easily I let self-

righteousness slip into even my most selfless-sounding prayers; how apt I am to confuse justice with revenge.

And then the sharp, revealing ending of this poem. God says,

*Your angers, your zeal, your lipsmackingly  
righteous indignation toward the many  
whose habits and sympathies offend you—*

*these must burn away before you'll apprehend  
how near I am, with what fervor I adore  
precisely these, the several who rouse your passions.*

This is a truth-telling. Forgiving others from the harm done to us is hard. Receiving forgiveness is equally hard. Real forgiveness, whatever side of it we're on, requires us to stand in full light, fully visible. It burns away our unjust judgments, our self-satisfactions, our self-justifications. Forgiveness is a practice, an exercise; and it is absolutely necessary to knowing, really understanding and taking in the love of God. The *fervor with which God adores us*, the poet says—not only for we who imagine ourselves lovable, but for the whole sorry, stumbling lot of us, all the time. God's fervent love, for precisely the ones who have crossed over into our space, and who maybe even have caused us harm. And for we who have crossed over into theirs.

*Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.* This is a prayer that takes courage. It invites God to scrutinize us up close, to correct and redirect us. It subjects us to acknowledging the need for our own change.

But can you see the crinkle at the corner of God's eye as this conversation happens? God's mercy stings as it burns away our pretensions, our sureness that we are right. But it comes with the chuckle of a poet, and a love that will not quit.