

**“The Way of Fearlessness”**

**Matthew 11:2-11**

**December 16, 2018**

**Third Sunday in Advent**

**Pastor Andy Kinsey**

***“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”***

**- Matthew 11:3**

**Prayer of Preparation**

O Lord, may you open our eyes to see and ears to hear what you are doing that we may take no offense at who you are! Amen.

**Sermon Message**

I don't know if many of you have ever been involved in theater. I know it can be a great deal of fun. I also know there are moments when actors may go off script and improvise. That's usually the sign of a good actor.

My acting debut was in the play *Lil Abner* in high school. I thank God I only had one line to remember as Lonesome Polecat! It was short and to the point. If you may recall, Lonesome Polecat and Hairless Joe were the ones who concocted the famous Kick-a-Poo Joy Juice in *Lil Abner*, which contained certain powers. To be sure, my time on stage was very short-lived, but fun.

Peggy was the one who spent the most time on stage, however. In *The King and I* she played Anna, opposite of a good friend of ours who played, of course the King of Siam. It was a big part, needless to say, with dancing, and singing, and dressing the part. Learning all those lines and songs was difficult, but she did it. And the rest as they say is history! Etc., etc., etc.!

Persons in theater, of course, learn scripts and plots, storylines, character development. Typically, when the actors learn scripts, they can, as I shared, learn to improvise and maybe more insights into the characters they are playing. However, when actors go completely off script, or when actors may tweak the script, others in the cast may get thrown off. It can happen.

## Cultural Script of Fear

Actors follow scripts, but so do the rest of us in a sense; cultures, societies, and institutions, families, groups, teams, businesses follow scripts too.

In one of the most interesting books I have read in a while, Frank Furedi of the University of Kent in Great Britain writes about how whole nations may follow what he calls a cultural script or what he is calling more specifically as a “script of fear.”<sup>1</sup>

In his new book *How Fear Works: Culture of Fear in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Furedi notes how individuals, communities, and organization use cultural resources to make sense of their experiences of fear. These resources provide guidance and meaning to people as they engage the troubles of everyday life. These resources, though, can become like scripts as they transmit rules about how we may feel, or how we may respond to what is taking place around us, especially when we engage in fear.<sup>2</sup>

Often, these “scripts” are taken-for-granted. We just think that there is one way to respond to fear and that’s it.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, what a “cultural script” does is “express the prevailing spirit of the times”; it is like the background music of so much information we receive that we just think “That’s the way it is,” without really questioning what is going on.<sup>4</sup>

For example, how accustomed we have become to the “breaking new” syndrome we hear every other minute? Is there any other kind of news these days, always with a sense of urgency? Or what about the rhetoric of doom we hear from some politicians who share that if they are not elected, the nation is in peril? Such rhetoric only invites us to think in terms of catastrophe or worst-case scenarios.<sup>5</sup>

As Furedi contends, through sheer repetition of terms like pandemics, wars, crises, extreme circumstances, invasions, cyberwar, terror alert – a lexicon of crisis develops, which permeates how we may then see the world and which then often can become manipulated for political or economic purposes.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Furedi, *How Fear Works: Culture of Fear in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-16.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 17

<sup>5</sup> Frank Furedi, “Precautionary Culture and the Rise of Possibilistic Risk Assessment” in *Erasmus Law Review* 2(2).

<sup>6</sup> See Frank Furedi, *How Fear Works*, 17.

The current wave of anxiety about Fake News is only a symptom of such suspicion, as it is always directed at other people's sources of news, which then only serves to widen the forces of fragmentation, which then serve to plant more seeds of distrust, which fuels more fear.<sup>7</sup> Etc., etc., etc.!

The culture of fear wants us to believe that this is the way it is, and we are just powerless in the face of it. And yet, part of gaining power over fear is to name fear and not to minimize it or try to say it doesn't exist, but to confront it and understand how it works.<sup>8</sup>

As Furedi writes, we have entered an era where there is uncertainty. There is a general unease about what is taking place in politics and more. Yes, we have fear, but too often, we fear the wrong things!<sup>9</sup>

To be sure, as Sigmund Freud taught, fear can warn us that something is wrong; it can alert us.<sup>10</sup> But fear can also paralyze us and tell us that we can't do anything about what we are facing. Fear can get us to pull up the drawbridge so that we keep the enemy (whomever or whatever that may be) at bay, but fear can also spark us to action to do the heroic and take risks. Left to itself, however, fear can all but eat our souls from within.<sup>11</sup>

That's what fear can do. It can get us to expect the worst about the future while also getting us to take our eyes off of what is taking place in the present. It can affect us in powerful and often unconscious ways, even getting us to doubt ourselves and others, even God.<sup>12</sup>

Maybe this is why the Bible, in so many places, teach us to not be afraid, as fear can move us further and further away from God and into following a script we may not want to follow.<sup>13</sup>

### **John the Baptist's Script**

I think this is where we find ourselves in Advent: somewhere between fear of what is occurring in the world and ourselves on the one hand, and hope of what God is going to do on the other: somewhere between fear and hope. Advent places

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 20; see also Frank Furedi, *The Politics of Fear* (London: Continuum Press, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 20; see also, Barry Glassner, *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans Are Afraid of the Wrong Things* (

<sup>10</sup> Sigmund Freud, *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1920).

<sup>11</sup> Frank Furedi, *How Fear Works*, 18.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>13</sup> There are 365 verses in the Bible where it says "fear not" or "do not be afraid." One for every day of the year.

us in this tension and it puts us on stage with some wonderful characters we may not have considered as part of the Advent and Christmas story.

The one character I have in mind, of course, is John the Baptist, the person whose script it was *to prepare the way* for other character in the story, Jesus, whose script it was to fulfill Israel's hopes as the Messiah.<sup>14</sup> In both characters, we find persons who were not afraid of much of anything. They were not afraid to buck the trends of the day, go against the grain, or even rub people the wrong way, especially those in high places.

Perhaps you may remember what happened to both John and Jesus, but the *Reader's Digest* version is that John lost his head and Jesus was nailed to a cross. They both lost their lives.

This should not surprise us, as the landscape during Jesus and John's day was very much a powder keg of unrest, both politically and religiously. There were all kinds of movements and groups and persons afoot saying and doing all kinds of things – from zealots who wanted to overthrow Rome, to the Essenes near the Dead Sea who wanted nothing to do with the filth of Jerusalem, to Sadducees and scribes and priests who wanted to maintain control of the Temple, to the Pharisees who were looking for ways to reform Judaism.<sup>15</sup>

All of these groups were very vibrant during Jesus and John's ministries, and there was a strong sense during this time that God was going to break into history and deliver Israel from oppression and usher in God's kingdom.<sup>16</sup>

That's where *we* typically pick up the story, with John the Baptist appearing in the wilderness, proclaiming repentance (Matthew 3:1-2).

John, you may remember, is Jesus' cousin, who invites the people of Israel to turn around and respond to God's call. And in great numbers, that's what the people do. They come from all over Judea and go out and hear what John has to say. They confess their sins and are baptized in the Jordan (Matthew 3:3-6).

But not everyone likes John's approach. The Pharisees and Sadducees, in particular, do not like what he is doing (Matthew 3:7).

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<sup>14</sup> N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone – Part One* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2004), 125

<sup>15</sup> See N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 498.

John, on the other hand, not having a good press agent, calls such leaders of the day a “brood of vipers” and warns them they had better “bear fruit worthy of repentance” too, or face God’s wrath (Matthew 3:7-8). Needless to say, John gets into trouble.

John also gets into trouble with Herod who arrests John and puts him in prison (Matthew 4:12). Herod did not appreciate John telling him that he couldn’t marry his brother’s wife (Matthew 14:2-6). What king would?

However, in John’s eyes, Herod is not the true king of Israel. The true king of Israel was on the way and the true king would eventually replace Herod as king.<sup>17</sup>

And that’s where we find John in our passage today: he is in prison, placed there by Herod, and, while in prison, he is beginning to have doubts, even some fears, about his cousin Jesus’ actions (Matthew 11:2). John is hearing things, and he is beginning to wonder if Jesus is really following his script as Israel’s Messiah.<sup>18</sup> John is hearing things, and they do not match up with what John was expecting.

John was reading the script where Messiahs would do grand and amazing things, but that wasn’t happening. John was expecting Jesus to do something revolutionary, like dethrone Herod and get him out of prison, but that wasn’t happening. And John was expecting Jesus to bring his powerful kingdom to bear on Israel’s sins and set the whole place ablaze with God’s winnowing fire, just as the prophet Elijah had done with the prophets of Baal, but that wasn’t happening (Matthew 4:1-12; 1 Kings 18:24-27).

### **Jesus’ Script**

And John is beginning to wonder if he had made a mistake trusting Jesus. After all, it didn’t sound at all like the script he had rehearsed in preparing the way for Jesus to come!<sup>19</sup> Hence, the question he asks of Jesus: “*Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?*” (Matthew 11:2-3). John is expecting action and deliverance, but what he gets is a strange, even inconclusive, response from Jesus, as Jesus really doesn’t answer John’s question directly, but tells John’s disciples to communicate the following:

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<sup>17</sup> N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone – Part One*, 124.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>19</sup> N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone – Part One*, 125.

“Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news delivered to them. And blessed are those who take no offense at me.”

Now, to be sure, if there is one thing that John the Baptist would have known it was the prophet Isaiah. And Jesus would have known that John would have recognized this passage from Isaiah 35.<sup>20</sup>

But what John was wondering was whether he had been missed something about Jesus’s script: after all, Jesus was going around befriending tax collectors and sinners (Matthew 11:19). Jesus was being accused of being a drunkard and a glutton (Matthew 11:18). And Jesus was gaining a reputation, but not for what John (and many others) were anticipating.

### **What Is Going On?**

What is going on? I think it is easy for us to look back on John’s fears and doubts and second-guess, and it is easy on this side of Jesus’ life and death to see how John may not have understood what Jesus was doing, improvising on the script.

However, I also think there are many people, even in our day, who would do the same: there are many people who would much prefer an Elijah with fire and brimstone to a Jesus who befriends welfare recipients and drug addicts.

When Jesus goes about proclaiming God’s kingdom, he is simply doing what he is preaching and, in doing so, fulfilling what the prophet Isaiah foretold, that wherever the Messiah is the blind will see, and the lame will walk, and the deaf hear, and lepers are cleansed, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news preached to them (Isaiah 35:5-6).

This is not something the people expected, or, if they did, they expected it to take place in the future; it was not something they envisioned happening in the present, especially in Jesus.

One of the crucial differences, it seems to me, between Jews and Christians, when it comes to the script of the Messiah, is that for Jews there is an understanding that “When the Messiah comes, there will be no more suffering, no and more pain, no more tears. When the Messiah comes, there will be no more

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<sup>20</sup> Isaiah 35:5-6.

persecution, no more oppression. That's what will happen when the Messiah comes: redemption. No more war. No more strife."

But when Jesus comes along suddenly we get a new twist on the script, for suddenly, "Wherever there is suffering and pain, *there* you will find the Messiah, and wherever there is brokenness and hunger, *there* you find the Messiah working and serving – among the prisoners, with the naked, amidst the conflict: *there* you will find Jesus" (Matthew 25:18-35).<sup>21</sup>

No wonder Jesus tells John: "And blessed is anyone who no takes offense at what I am doing." How true! Blessed are those who take no offense at such deeds and acts of mercy! Because that's not what many expect a Messiah to do!

And it's not what many expect followers of Jesus to do either. Because there are many people who do not expect a church to do these things!

Indeed, the other day I had a person say to me: "Pastor Andy, I just don't know why Grace Church is so involved in the community, helping and serving, building bridges, working with the homeless and poor. Why is that?"

Well, because I thought that's what we are supposed to be doing! That's the script we have been given – living a life of faith, hope, and love, and mercy in a world that breeds fear and suspicion, in a culture that wants us think we can't do anything but build walls and see others as foes. That's not our script! That may be somebody else's script, but that's not our script!

As Christians, by virtue of our baptism, our script says to tell fear to take a hike, and to tell those in high places to get with the program, and sees Jesus as working to bring blessings to persons and places most consider hopeless. That's the kind of script Jesus is following and that he has given to us: to reveal where and how God is at work.

And those who recognize this and who are not offended by it or fearful of it – they are the ones who will know the blessings of God. They will be the ones who have ears to hear and eyes to see. They will be the one who get what the script says and do it and then enter the joy of salvation. They will be the ones who live in the light of the Lord and be blessed! Amen.

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<sup>21</sup> I credit Fred Craddock with this insight from his lectures on preaching at Candler School of Theology, Emory University.