

When I was a little girl with a very active imagination, I was afraid to go upstairs to my bedroom alone at night. I had visions of tiny witches flying around my bed casting spells and alligators hiding underneath it – just waiting to eat my feet. It didn't help matters, that my older brother loved to jump out from behind my door to scare me.

As an adult, I can walk in the dark; but I don't care to, especially when I am alone. My heart races, my ears perk up for any weird noises, my skin tingles and I am filled with a sense of dread just under the surface that something bad could happen. Those patterns of someone jumping out from behind a door are embedded deep within my psyche, even though as a rational adult I know I don't have to be afraid.

This past week I have been filled with a similar sense of dread in my body that danger is lurking in the shadows waiting to pounce not just on me but on all of us.

The presidential debate with a confused president and a vitriolic competitor coupled with the Supreme Court's ruling that presidents have immunity to prosecution for anything they do while in office sent me to ponder worse case scenarios that historians, political scientists and even the dissenting justices have affirmed.

We have traded a president who is subject to the laws of our country for a king that can jail or kill his opponents without fear of legal repercussions. This ruling threatens our freedom of speech and the free press that is a cornerstone to any democracy.

Add to that the statement made this week by Kevin Roberts, the head of the heritage foundation and architect of Project 2025 that merges governance with a militant brand of authoritarian Christian nationalism. "We are in the process of the second American Revolution, which will remain bloodless if the left allows it to be." Meaning that the political right aligned with white Christian nationalism will use violence against people if they don't win this election.

There is a palpable sense of darkness out there and we wonder, when will it strike? And this feeling is not just for those who oppose authoritarianism. It is also felt by folks who fear losing their traditional values to woke culture.

The right fears the left and the left fears the right. Both use similar phrases like – "We have to preserve our democracy; we have to uphold our constitution. If we don't pay attention our rights will be taken away."

And just a few days ago we welcome thousands of people to this county for July 4th– the fireworks thrilled us with its splendor as we celebrated what it means to be an American as put forth by our Declaration of Independence.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

In other words, We have the freedom to pursue our own paths, including the freedom of speech, religion and movement. As long as it does not infringe on the rights of others.

All of us here have decided to pursue our rights in this breathtakingly beautiful, isolated county – the ancestral lands of the Nez Perce. Many of us have chosen not to get involved in politics or listen to the news. Hoping against hope that if trouble comes it will not find us here.

Maybe this is a part of our own survival instincts kicking in. Our choice to flee from potential danger. But even in this county division runs right under the surface. It plays out with our tendencies to find fault, blame, mistrust and divide along many lines – ranchers, farmers, environmentalists, city and rural, progressive, conservative, queer affirming and denying to name a few.

Jesus lived during a time of political and cultural upheaval as well. For centuries the Jews had been praying for a savior like that of King David. Someone that would protect them from abuse and allow them to live in freedom. Freedom to worship the way they wanted. Freedom to make a living. Freedom to live without fear of oppression.

As I look to Jesus and how he approached his life and ministry, he has more than a philosophy to offer us today. He offers us a way of being that runs counter to fear and darkness.

The beauty and power in his ministry is that he felt everything that we are feeling today. He came equipped as a human with the same survival instincts that all of us have. He not only shows us but also offers us is a way to grow beyond those instincts – to meet them and acknowledge them but to not let them have their way with us.

In our Gospel reading today Jesus goes to his hometown of Nazareth after making a name for himself as a prophet, wisdom teacher and healer. But his hometown rejects him.

"We knew him when he was a little boy. Who does he think he is now? What kind of a son leaves behind his mother and siblings to lead a movement that's probably going to get him and a bunch of people in trouble?"

But Jesus seems to take this in stride. He could have gotten angry and blamed them. He could have felt victimized. He could have even sought revenge. But instead, he recognizes that when people are confronted with something beyond their comfort zone that doesn't fit into their world view, they get afraid and point their fingers outward.

Jesus simply says, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown and among their own kin and in their own house.”

Not missing a beat, he sends out his disciples instructing them to model simplicity in what they wear and carry and even where they stay. This was not about personal gain or power. It was not about winning over converts or forcing people to believe or act a certain way. It wasn't a veiled attempt to get people to approve of him.

Rather it was a radical ministry of inviting people to trust in love. to give themselves over to the power of love to guide them and to bless others.

As Jesus reminds them just before he goes to Nazareth, the Kingdom of God is like a tiny mustard seed that when planted grows into a huge bush where birds can make nests in its shade. The kingdom of God is humble and offers life, nourishment, joy, beauty, connection.

In other words, he tells his disciples your work is to plant the mustard seed – the tiniest of seeds on the planet. It is not about gaining power or control. It is not about promoting a set of doctrines. It is simply about connecting with people – heart to heart, story by story. That simple act of letting God's light shine in you and out to others is actually what brings healing and hope.

He then added, “If you're not welcomed or not listened to, quietly withdraw. Don't make a scene. Shake the dust off your feet and be on your way.” Don't get bogged down in blame or victimhood, just move on. You can do this as long as you remember to trust in your own beloved connection with God.

So we are told that is what the disciples did.

They preached with joyful urgency that life can be radically different when we lead with love instead of fear; They sent the demons packing; they brought wellness to the sick, anointing their bodies, healing their spirits.

This is our heritage as disciples of Jesus – to walk in this mustard seedlike way. We are authorized by Jesus as a community of faith to speak and act on love's behalf.

But this is tricky in our day and age as we have become sensitized to our own history of manifest destiny here in this county as we displaced Indigenous people in the name of God. As we fell into the trap of believing that as white Christians we were racially and morally superior to black and brown skinned people. That it was up to us as good Christians to save the souls of the heathens and win people for Christ.

This is exactly why people don't like organized religion. They have been hurt by being on the other end of the salvation agenda of the white, heterosexual Christian majority in power.

This word authority carries a lot of baggage today and rightly so. So often we think of it as power over someone – the power to give orders, make decisions, enforce obedience.

Jesus does not authorize his disciples to go out as blowhards or know-it-alls. They are not sent to “claim the culture” for him or anyone else. They are guests seeking welcome, strangers looking for food and shelter, humbly willing to commit themselves to the well-being of the people they encounter.

So how can we claim authority as Christians today in a way that honors all of creation? It is important to make some distinctions here between Christian nationalism and the way of Jesus.

Christian nationalism is rooted in a belief that Christians have the moral and political high ground. That if you are not “saved.” If you don’t believe in Christian domination in all walks of life, then you are a threat.

It is an ethnocentric framework that throughout history has disempowered and oppressed people groups – Native Americans, Jews, people of color, and the queer community and women. White Christian nationalists not only believe that their ways are superior but that they have to enforce their ways and beliefs on others to ensure total Christian domination. And they couch their rhetoric with Christian values.

Our scripture passage today highlights the way of Jesus – humble, loving, a being with and not over people. A way that listens, honors, welcomes and heals. The way of Jesus invites us to love our neighbors regardless of their skin color, culture, sexual orientation, or faith background.

The way of Jesus invites us to see ourselves as the stranger who seeks the welcome of others. This way invites us to feed the hungry, care for the sick and be a peacemaker. Because God loves the world – not just a small group of self-righteous people.

A word that comes to mind is courage. As I have shared before, courage comes from the root word, Cour – meaning heart. It is a way of being that listens to the heart and acts from that place of love and respect.

To take authority in our time and place is to take on the mantle of courage just like the disciples that were sent out with nothing but the love of God.

This is something that can’t be mandated. It is a call to be about our own transformation from the collective demons of fear both within us and in our culture that drive us unconsciously to act out of our survival instincts of fighting, fleeing or burying our heads in the sand.

You see there is a darkness of fear within each of us that we project onto our communities in the form of trying to gain power and control through division.

Our mission is to recognize that. “Yes, I am afraid. Yes, that makes me want to lash out and blame others. Yes that makes me want to take control and force others to act in a way that will make me feel safe. Yes, I want to hide behind my religion or up in the mountains and forget about the troubles of the world.”

Jesus sees all of that. Because he lived it to.

He gently says to all of us – “Follow me. Abide in my love. make your home in that love. share that love with others in tiny mustard seed ways. It’s scary out there but I am not leaving you alone. You have each other. You have the gifts of the spirit – joy, peace, compassion, love, tenderness, forgiveness, patience.” Whenever you experience these gifts, know that I am there with you, helping and upholding you.”

“So, Help each other, uphold each other, heal each other.
Your mission is not to change people. Your mission is to love people.”

Love overcomes fear and loneliness, sets people free from torment,
It's a slow, gentle medicine. But powerful.

So here we are – a congregation that is known in our community as people who welcome and act in ways of love for the healing of each other and our neighbors.

Now more than ever it is important to look to Jesus as our prophet and guide. To be able to meet attempts to control through unbridled power with grounded authority that comes from the heart.

This is our mandate – to heal, to cast out the demons both within and outside ourselves with courage.

This means we can make distinctions and claim the way of Jesus as our way. To take that prophetic stance to speak to injustice and to work towards righting the wrongs through loving action.

It is my hope and prayer that others will join us in this beautiful way of love.

May this be so... Amen.