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Some weeks, if I just look at one reading like the gospel today, I don't have a clue what I'm going to say. And it takes looking at all the readings to find a thread that seems to be there that I can share with you. And this gospel is definitely one of those gospels that left me feeling like Homer Simpson – doh! – but in looking at the others there seems to be a thread.

We've got from Haggai this story of the return from exile. They'd been in Babylon for a couple of generations and they returned. They were slaves for the most part in Babylon. They had nothing. They returned. Just imagine going overland from Babylon in eastern Iraq, all the way back to Jerusalem. They didn't fly El-Al; they didn't even get those tourist buses. They walked and rode on camels, if they had them.

They get back and the place is in ruins. The temple was destroyed. The people who [had] left were all the artists and the courtiers and the high priests - the upper classes, the educated people. The ones that were left were peasants and below. They didn't, couldn't maintain the temple. Couldn't rebuild it. And so there's this real time of anxiety of depression, of desolation. Oh, great, we're going home! We're going home! Oh my gosh, look at home! How are we going to fix this?

And so we hear this message: 'How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing?' It's a time of anxiety and fear.

Then we hear from Second Thessalonians and this is also a time of great cultural upheaval. The people have all kinds of cultural pressures. There's the Roman Empire to contend with. But these Christians, most whom have been part of synagogues, were finding themselves being thrown out of the synagogues, being rejected (probably by family) because of these newfangled ideas they'd gotten. There's resistance: Resistance to these new ideas, that somehow this Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah. Resistance to change. They were seen as blasphemers.

And so any voice that came to them that could explain that in some new and more palatable way, they were open to. And there were lots of different ideas floating around. They were trying to create this new thing and they were grabbing onto all sorts of ideas. Lots of things today that we would think they were crazy, because we have the advantage of two thousand years of sifting through this stuff.

But they were confused and under tremendous pressure. Because if in fact they got it wrong about when Jesus came to collect all those who were his followers in the end times, the fear is, "What if we have it wrong and are not included?"

So there's pressure to get it right. And fear, so they're grabbing at anything.

| Then again in the gGospels, we have the Sadducees confronting Jesus. Now this, of course, is written after the epistle by a generation or so. And it's really written more to their situation than to the time of Jesus, even though the story is set in the time of Jesus. So here are these Sadducees. And the Sadducees are defined here – talk about stereotyping – as 'Those Who Say There Is No Resurrection'. Something tells me there was a lot more to them than that, but one of the things they didn't believe in was the resurrection. Not uncommon for Jews. And this question (which is ridiculous at the very least) about whose wife this woman is going to be, of these seven brothers, is clearly an attempt to play *Gotcha!* with Jesus. Not, generally speaking, a good experience for anybody who had attempted [it], at least in the gospels (which of course were written by the winners).

Here they are, see, they're in the same situation. Not only are they experiencing pressure from the Romans, but now there's this nutcase running around the country healing people and preaching and he's drawing crowds. And they see that as pressure also. He's stomping all over the law, he's disobeying the ten commandments right and left, he's not keeping the Sabbath, he's not keeping kosher, he's eating without washing his hands, he's just throwing everything out.

So not only do we have contend with the Romans and their pressure, but now we've got characters like this Jesus of Nazareth who are trying to destroy the faith and who are blasphemers, going around saying that they can offer forgiveness of sins.

And so they're digging in their heels. They are digging in their heels.

Now, these two responses that I've described in these three scenarios - one is the digging in of heels, the other is grabbing at anything to try to keep things ordered in the face of fear and anxiety - are in no way unfamiliar to us! We do the same sorts of things, we dress it up in our twenty-first century clothes with our twenty-first century issues and our twenty-first century civilization and mentality and experiences, but it's the same sort of thing. Now, granted it's not just that polarized, there's all this continuum in between, but it's the same sort of human response to fear and anxiety. And anybody you ask would say that this is an age of fear and anxiety.

But my question might be [this]: Okay, when was it NOT an age of fear and anxiety? We like to paint the picture of the late forties and early fifties of the twentieth century as one of these idyllic times.

Can anybody here remember Duck and Cover? That's when we were told, during the Cuban missile crisis, that when the nuclear weapons start falling what you're supposed to do to save yourself is get under your desk and cover your head up with your arms.

To save yourself from a nuclear blast.

Yes, those were calm and easy-going idyllic times.

Or if you happened to be black in Little Rock Arkansas in the fifties. Or you happened to be on the Yalu River in Korea.

We like to look back at some other time as this golden age when everything was wonderful. There are even nostalgia magazines on the newsstand. We like to look back at these wonderful days, with woodstoves and outhouses and famine when the crops failed and slavery... Wonderful things like that.

Women dying in childbirth, infant mortality rates [of] something like two out of three. Wonderful days, wonderful days.

But all of those things are part of a response to fear and anxiety in our own times. There seems to be no end to the possibilities for our responses to fear and anxiety.

| And I looked at a line, coming from God through the prophet Haggai, and he says, "My spirit abides among you. Do not fear."

My spirit abides among you. Do not fear.

This isn't a proclamation of what you should do in response to your fear. This is going to the root. God is with you, you live in God and God lives in you. Don't fear at all! You don't have to respond to it if it's not there!

| If we can ever, ever get our hearts and minds wrapped around the divine in-dwelling: That God lives within us and all of creation, that we are like fish in water with God – the water is within and without on a fish. Same with the divine presence with us. We are both swimming in it and it is within us. This divine presence loves us, wants the best for us. And what God's desire for us is beyond even our words to speak it.

My spirit abides among you. Do not fear.

Our worst scenarios, our deepest fears are paled to insignificance in the face of God's love and care for us. Not just here, not just in this physical material world, but for eternity. Beyond even our wildest imaginings, the imaginings of our very limited material-oriented thinking.

It's not a question of holding onto the old ways so we can keep everything in good order; it's not a question of whether we throw all that old silly stuff out so we can rewrite everything for our age. It's neither of those and both of those. We may do either or both of those, but if it's only as a means to somehow put salve on our fear, it's pointless, isn't it?

Every time an angel appeared to a person in the Bible, what are the first words they say? They say, "Fear not." Fear not. The first messages that we always receive are *fear not*. Then we'll move on from there. Fear not.

We are invited to somehow turn our hearts. It will never be a forever fix for most of us; we will never be fearless. But every time we can turn our hearts away from fear, we get a taste of the kingdom of God. It's an opportunity to move those little experiences closer and closer and closer together.

Keep in mind, keep in heart: "My spirit abides among you. Do not fear."

Amen.