

“Lessons Learned in Prison”
Sermon by Rev. Katherine Raley
First Christian Church, Colorado Springs, CO
May 26, 2013

Colossians 3:1-4

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

I should warn you all before I start. I’m standing up here this morning with the expectation that something life-changing will happen here today. Yes, life-changing for *everyone* in this room. So if you do not want your life to be changed, I suggest that you either walk out quietly, or just change your attitude. If you stay, I believe that God and Christ and the Holy Spirit will change your life for the better. In the next, oh, 15 or so minutes, you will change the way you think about fear. You will change the way you think about the things that you afraid of. And, even if it doesn’t happen right away, you will no longer be slaves to those fears.

If I were to ask you right now what you are afraid of, what would you answer? Would it be one of those phobias that most of us have in some form or another – a fear of heights, of spiders, of snakes, or of dark, small spaces? Maybe some of you might get a little more personal with your fears – a fear of death, a fear of being alone, a fear of failure?

Fear is a part of all of us. Sometimes it is actually healthy and keeps us safe, instead of stupidly harming ourselves, but sometimes, that fear just gets in the way of our lives.

The thing is, we all do things that we are afraid of *every single day*. Yep. All of you, I don’t care how fearful you think you are – you have conquered some of your fears. You have talked to someone who you were afraid to talk to. You have walked into a group of people even though you were afraid they might not accept you. You have given away money even though you were afraid you might not have enough left to do the things that *you* want to do.

Why? What makes you do something even though you’re afraid of it?

It is because of a belief that it is worth it. A belief that acting *despite* your fear might be a little painful, a little scary, but that the end result will make your life better.

You have already conquered fear. Now, you just need to learn how to do it all the time. Fear won't go away. But, you can change your response to it.

You already have the answer right in front of you. You have already *heard* the answer in this sanctuary this morning: Colossians, chapter 3, verse 2. *Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.*

That's it. Ok, let's dig a little deeper. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. Does that mean think only about the clouds and the weather and the sun and moon and stars and spaceships and satellites that are circling around our heads? Nope. This author had something more in mind. Not a literal "things that are above your head," but instead, things that are of God. The Colossians, the original intended audience of this letter, were getting misled by other teachings. Someone else was trying to tell them that they had to do a lot of other things in order to earn their worth with Christ. But this letter is telling them, "No! Stop! You have *already* been raised with Christ! You who have already been baptized and joined with His church don't have to do all those extra things to be with Christ. You are *already* hidden in Him. That means that all you have to do now is set your mind on the things that He cares about – those things that are more worthy than the worldly limits you are placing on yourselves."

The Colossians were being told, stop putting importance on those things that God doesn't care about. You are in Christ – start paying attention to those things that *Christ* cares about. Set your minds on the *heart* and *passion* of God.

Do you remember what we said before, about what it is that makes you do something even though you're afraid of it? A belief that it is worth it. A belief that acting *despite* your fear might be a little painful – a little scary – but that the end result will make your life better.

What would happen if you set your minds on the heart and passion of God? What would happen if you truly focused on those things that matter the most in the world? Would it be worth it to do something even though you were afraid?

I'd like to tell you a few stories about people who overcame their fear by setting their sights on things above, on the heart and passion of God.

One of these stories comes from a book on ministry that I'm currently reading – *When “Spiritual But Not Religious” Is Not Enough: Seeing God in Surprising Places, Even the Church*, written by Reverend Lillian Daniel. In her book, Rev. Daniel describes an experience she had when she was invited as a guest speaker at a graduate class on urban ministry.

This class was a little different than the typical classroom settings in which she found herself. This classroom wasn't in an ordinary college – instead, it was instead one of the most secure prisons in our country – Sing Sing, the maximum security prison on the Hudson River outside of New York. The students she was joining for the day were studying ministry in the midst of their prison sentences – they all had been there for decades, and many of them would never again step outside of the walls of Sing Sing. These would never experience the internet – they had arrived at Sing Sing before its arrival, and it is a luxury that prison does not include.

These prisoners could have become violent, closed off, resentful. They could have reflected the bare walls, locks, chains, and bars around them. But, they didn't. Instead, these students welcomed Rev. Daniel with light-hearted jokes, and eager minds. They had studied theology with a passion that most seminary professors would envy. They might never be in the outside world again, but they wanted to do God's work wherever they could. As Lillian Daniel puts it, in the depths of that tomb, they were keeping their minds on things above.

“Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.”

You see, sometimes we start to respond to the world around us as if it is a tomb. Some of us might not feel any more *free* than those students in Sing Sing maximum-security prison. We might look around us and start to feel as if there isn't any hope. And yet, Daniel says, “Human beings are [actually] built with this divine blue chip for hope,

with this inborn godly capacity to set our minds on the things above, and to see resurrection and new life even in the hardest situation.”¹ To set your minds on things above. To see resurrection and new life even in the hardest situation.

Our country experienced a tragedy this week in the deaths and destruction caused by tornadoes that tore through Texas and Oklahoma.² Many people were injured, and many people died, including beloved children. Many people lost their homes and their businesses in those tornadoes. And it was just one among many tragedies this week – other children died who were not in the news, other parents mourn. Other children were left without parents. Tragedies happened all over our country this week. The tornadoes make us aware of just how much we don’t understand. They cause some to question God and God’s love for us.

But there have been other responses, too. Not a questioning of God, but instead beautiful *experiences* of God. There have been other disasters in our world that have been much more destructive than the tragic tornadoes that ripped through Moore, Oklahoma. Think the earthquake in Haiti in 2010. Think the horrific tsunami that killed thousands and thousands of people in Sri Lanka in 2004. Some might say that if there is any proof that God does not exist, those are it. But, what happened after those tragedies?

God. People helped. People cared. If you want to imagine a scenario in which it would be *impossible* to believe in God, think of those disasters. And then, see NO ONE stopping to help, no one risking their own lives to save someone else, see no communities rushing to provide aid, see not a dollar pulled from the hands of potential donors, see no relief agencies spring into action, see no one offer the suffering the milk of human kindness, see no one acting in the name of their God to offer help, aid, expertise and prayers.

That’s not our world. No, our world is God-infused, God-filled, in which people *overcome their fears* in order to respond with the heart and passion of God to be with others in need, to others who are suffering. In our world, hearts are broken, prayers are offered, help is volunteered, pocketbooks are opened. God is present, and fear is

¹ Daniel, Lillian. *When Spiritual But Not Religious...* pg. 73

² http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/22/us/oklahoma-tornado.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

overcome.

“Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.”

You see, even in response to tragic disasters, we have to overcome our own fears in order to help. It’s a sad thing to think about, but there’s more to disaster stories. There are many, many loving responses, but, there is also fear.

Our fear is present when we have to decide whether or not to give our resources helping someone. That might be a tornado victim who we could help with our money, or a tornado victim whose home we could help rebuild in a few months when the community is ready to support volunteers. It also might be the person on the corner asking for money. Or the organizations asking for volunteers to serve. Or, it could be the person who just needs to talk to someone.

There are parts of us that respond to these situations with fear and worry for our own well-being. If we give our money away, will we have enough for our own needs? If we give our time away, will we have enough to do the things that *we* want to do? If we give our *compassion*, will we lose our contentment with the world?

We could give in those fears that make decisions for us every day. Or, we could remember those lessons learned in a classroom in a maximum-security prison.

Set your sights on things above, on the heart and passion of God. Your sights are set, you breathe deeply, and resistance melts away. A peace fills not only your mind, quieting those fearful anxieties, but fills your body too. You breathe, and start a conversation of which you had been afraid. You breathe, and loosen your grip on a material thing so that you can pass it on to someone who needs it more. You breathe, and somehow you have the energy to spend a couple of hours a week volunteering. You breathe, and your mind and heart form a prayer of forgiveness.

Imagine – your sights are set on the heart and passion of God. Your fear melts away. Your sights are set – on the love of God that is not just far away in a golden, ethereal, heavenly realm, but here and now, passionate about you and me, passionate about dispelling greed, dispelling selfishness that makes a young rich ruler afraid to give

up his wealth in exchange for following Jesus, dispelling the fear that tightens our grip on our time and money instead of freely giving it to those who are suffering.

Prisoners in Sing Sing have a lesson to teach us. Set your sights on things above – the passion and love of God – and not on things that are on earth – the fear that too often guides our decisions. God’s love is present – in the suffering, and in the response to suffering. Set your sights on that love, and fear will melt away.