On March 4, 1933, in the midst of the Great Depression in which the economy had slowed to a halt with over 25% unemployment—much more than what Americans are experiencing now—President Franklin Delano Roosevelt stepped up to the podium where he had just taken the Presidential oath and was sworn in by Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes. In the fourth line of his inaugural address, the new President said, "This great Nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and will prosper. So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance."  

Like President John F. Kennedy's famous 1961 inaugural line, "my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country" or President Ronald Reagan's 1981 statement, "In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem, government is the problem." FDR's declaration "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself" has continued in America's political consciousness. Without making any political or economic statement, it is fair to say that the thirty-second President's proclamation, "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself," is laden with theological import.

Christianity does not encourage fear. In this fourth Sunday of Easter, we recall Jesus' statement to his disciples on Maundy Thursday "Don't be troubled or afraid." (John 14: 27) (Common English Bible). At the same time, fear—phobos in Greek—can be an internal warning signal to keep us on the right path. In my long pilgrimage toward ordained ministry in one of the battery of tests Presbyterian candidates must undergo, I learned that I apparently lack the regular

---

person's fear of heights. This may partially explain some close calls at the Grand Canyon and an elbow fracture in the Swiss Alps.

When any of us look to the future, there may seem to be ample room for what President Roosevelt labeled, "nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror." College graduates fear the unknown as job opportunities seem limited and student loans come due. Others fear financing education. Economic uncertainty is widespread. Environmental fears are always in the news. Hospitals are filled with people fearing imminent operations and medical test results; fears which are shared by their loved ones. Many people are acquainted with the fear accompanying grief. Wars and rumors of war in the Middle East, political, employment, family, and racial tension may seem constant. Almost every branch of Christianity currently appears afflicted with some sort of discord and imbalance. There is much cause for concern. There is a lot to worry about.

Today's text from 1 John, profoundly tells us how to deal with and respond to fear. According to John the Apostle, "perfect love casts out fear." For John, love dispels fear, as light dispels darkness. Fear and love are opposites. They are contrary to one another and mutually exclusive. If we find ourselves in a state of fear, we need to consider what that perfect love is which casts it out.

Earlier in this chapter, in verse 8, John states "God is love." This statement may strike you as a cliché. But according to University of Chicago theologian and Jesuit Priest David Tracy, John's metaphor for understanding God---"God is love"---significantly differed from the view of ancient Greeks and Romans regarding the nature of divine reality. Tracy writes, "That God must be Pure intelligence seemed clear (recall Aristotle). That God may also be named The Good, including The Good beyond Being (The Republic) was true for Plato and many Platonists." But for Christianity, as John tells us, "God is love," a concept which scandalized ancient thinkers.

What does this mean? Tracy suggests that our "singular clue" to the identity of God is found in the passion, cross, and resurrection of "Jesus of Nazareth proclaimed to be the Christ" which express "the Christian sense of the nature of God as Love." As John says, "God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him" (1 John 4: 9).

In response to this love that God has demonstrated for us in this "singular clue" of Jesus Christ, "we ought to love one another" (1 John 4: 11). The basis of this love for others is therefore not our own resolution and determination because we fall short, but rather what we as Christ's followers do because he first loved us by sending his Son for the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Even though God is invisible---"no one has ever seen God"---"if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us." (1 John 4: 12).

5 Ibid.
The impact of John's teaching was extraordinary. Sociologist Rodney Stark writes in his new book, *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World's Largest Religion*, that the theme that because God loves humanity, Christians may not please God unless they love one another was "incompatible with pagan convictions." But the truly revolutionary principle," Stark writes, "was that Christian love and charity must extend beyond the boundaries of family and even those of faith, to all in need." As early Church apologist Tertullian wrote in approximately the year 200 A.D., "Such work of love (for so it is) puts a mark upon us, in the eyes of some [pagan unbelievers]." Westminster Presbyterian Church continues this tradition of love with its many ministries, a tradition that perhaps was the "most important factor in the success and growth of the early church."

John's logical spiral thus begins with God's love for us in Christ to which we respond with love for others. Trust in God's perfect love frees us from our persistent fears. If we have fear, for whatever reason, we need to remember that God is love and that God loved us and that that love of God for us is manifested in the loving work of Jesus Christ on our behalf, an example of love which we, in turn, pass along toward others. And somewhat repeating himself in verse 19, John states, "We love because he first loved us."

It is one thing to read John's powerful words, another to comprehend and experience his message in our lives. This is why John's statement in verse 13 that God "has given us of his Spirit" is so important. You recall that during the Last Supper Jesus promised his disciples that the Holy Spirit would "guide you into all the truth" (John 16:13). Ultimately, it is the Holy Spirit who persuades us that God is love and the corresponding consequences of that love for us, which John sets forth. This includes the conviction that "perfect love casts out fear."

We might ask, when does "perfect love cast out fear?" When does love dispel fear? How does it happen? After all, we never seem to be wholly fear free. Protestant Reformer John Calvin---whose portrait is in stain glass in the back of the sanctuary [up there at the top]---beautifully wrote in response to these basic questions, "though fear is not wholly shaken off, yet when we flee to God as to a quiet harbor, safe and free from all danger of shipwreck and of tempests, fear is really expelled, for it gives way to faith." We can respond to our fears by viewing them as signals for us to flee to God, remembering his prior and constant love for us.

Let us pray,

"Dear God, help us to appreciate that you first loved us in Jesus Christ, help us to love others, and dispel our fears with your perfect love so that our fears will give way to greater faith." Amen.

---

7 Ibid.
9 Ibid.