

Masks

What with the Iran nuclear deal getting finalized last week and Wednesday's endless Republican presidential debate finally coming to a merciful end, it seems the overwhelming message from so many folks lately is "Be afraid!"

"Be very afraid!"

So I guess I shouldn't have been surprised when I got to the church the other day and there's a huge stack of color glossy postcards that scream "Judgment Day Against America! — coming on September 23!"

That's this Wednesday, if you want to put it in your calendar!

All of which followed on the heels of a video a dear friend sent me showing world-wide nuclear war that somehow, according to the folks spreading this video around, is God's will, with my friend asking: "what do you make of this?!"

Funny how hungry we are for fear.

It's not a surprise really.

Fear and fear mongering are the life blood of more than a few Christian denominations and fear and fear mongering continue to be quite popular in both of our major political parties.

Maybe we love fear and fear mongering so much because it feeds into our all too human need to be better than the next guy, to enjoy the prospect of me making it while that gal over there misses the boat.

It's all about just desserts and settling scores, it seems.

So I gotta tell you, as I tossed those postcards and deleted the video, the question is what shall we do with all the hysteria and threats of doomsday?

What shall we do with those very personal fears that so many of us live with, fears we so often hide even from ourselves.....?

Maybe the gospel has something to say.

Because when you look at today's gospel, Jesus seems to be coming from an entirely different place.

Here's James and John, haggling over who is the greatest, meaning:

Who gets the big house and the Mercedes Benz, and who doesn't?

Who wins at the game of life, and who's the loser?

It's a contest rooted in fear, fear of not measuring up, fear of looking like a loser.

So Jesus sits them down and does a most unusual thing: he plops down with a little kid.

And here we might take a moment and step back.

Because the "what" and the "why" of this child may not be so obvious.

Looking at this child with 21st century eyes, **we** are most likely to see an adorable innocent — so maybe Jesus is saying that "adorable and innocent" is the pathway to God.

But this is first century Palestine, where "adorable and innocent" probably are not the first thing folks think of when they think about children.

In those days, children died early and often from disease and hunger.

Children with birth defects or other physical challenges, children born out of wedlock, children who were orphaned, these kids, the historians say, were often tossed out, left to fend for themselves: not necessarily adorable, certainly not innocent but definitely vulnerable.

And did you notice?

There's no mention of a mom or dad in this picture.

So perhaps this child **is** one of those street kids, naked before the powers and dangers of the world.

What is it about this child, who stands exposed before the powers and dangers of this world, what is it about this child that makes her a pathway to the face of God?

But before we can answer that question, there's another thing we need to look at, if our hope is to come face to face with the Living God.

It's in those long ago hurts and traumas and sufferings, often endured **as children**, that we tend to bury, to hide away, to refuse to revisit, even as adults.

These hurts span the gamut from physical, sexual and emotional abuse to neglect or scorn or abandonment.

These traumas create very often feelings of anger, even rage; a sense of worthlessness and despair.

And we deal with them at first by hiding them away, by developing masks that are meant to show the world that all is fine and dandy, and after a long time of practicing, we can sometimes even convince ourselves that all is fine and dandy, when in fact it is rage or despair or hopelessness that lurks just below the surface of things.

It's been said: "Unless you deal with your past, your past will deal with you."

Meaning, that the stuff we thought was well hidden by our masks tends to leak out, harming especially those we are closest to.

But to risk exploring those old hurts is to become naked once again, to become vulnerable and exposed, just like that young child in first century Palestine, perched on Jesus' knee.

And yet, just as the child's vulnerability creates a pathway to the face of God, perhaps our own vulnerability does too.

In fact, there's a form of psychological therapy that helps get folks to that place of openness, of vulnerability.

The fellow who champions this method says something very important about how he prepares himself for every session: it's something every Christian might be wise to do before beginning each new day.

He says: 'Before every session I take a moment to remember my humanity,

because there is no experience that anyone has that I cannot share,

no fear that I cannot understand,

no suffering that I cannot care about,

because I too am human,

I too am vulnerable.

And what he does with each patient is to help them discard the many masks each of us creates as we go through life.

Understanding his own need, his own vulnerability, he creates a climate of total acceptance, which makes it safe for the patient to expose — and then let go of — mask after mask.

As each is discarded, as the patient is met with unconditional acceptance, lo and behold, we glimpse the sheer beauty of the patient's naked face.

When the last mask falls, what is left is the least; only naked humanity remains, vulnerable and exposed. Shea, Mark, 232-3. (modified).

I think what Jesus may be wanting us to see is something like this.

When we act tough or go looking for glory, or are afraid of what's inside, it's awfully hard to get to where God is.

Which may be why all the fire and brimstone, all the fear mongering, is so compelling; it protects us from being naked vulnerable exposed.

After all, if I'm on the side of a rampaging god (or country or politician), then the need to be vulnerable flies out the window — the chance to enter life raw and exposed, like a young, abandoned child, never takes root.

Maybe we so often choose a rampaging god (or country or politician) because maybe we are afraid that if we remove the many masks we each of us wear, as individuals, as a community, as a nation, all we might find is simply a mess.

But Jesus assures us that if we summon the courage to let our masks fall away, what remains is not a mess at all, but something beautiful, something that is even holy.

That why he says: "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Whether its the dirty little ragamuffin that Jesus embraces or the man shedding masks in his therapy session, or we with our own hurts to explore — to let go of-- I think what Jesus may be getting at is that when we risk being vulnerable, naked to the powers and dangers of the world, it's then, and only then, that you get to see

your true face, and lo and behold, it looks like the face of Jesus, it looks like the face of God....

.....which makes sense I suppose, because — in whose image are we made, anyway?

+amen