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**Narrative Lectionary 2.27 – Lent 3
Mark 12:1-17**

**15 March 2020
Salem, Bridgeport**

“Guidance from Government and God”

Render to Caesar the things that are Caesars and to God the things that are God's.

In this time of the corona virus, we receive guidance not only from government but from God.

The question “Is it lawful to pay taxes?” was not really a question about taxes,
because for people in Jesus’ time, it was about far more than paying taxes.
Roman law required that taxes be paid in Roman – not Jewish – currency.
And Roman coins were engraved with an image of Caesar,
and an inscription proclaiming Caesar as the son of the god, Augustus.
So to comply with Roman law you needed to possess a coin with a graven image,
something expressly forbidden by the 10 commandments.
If you didn’t use Roman currency, you were breaking Roman law;
if you did use it, you were breaking God’s law.
Whatever you did would be seen by someone as wrong.

So it was the perfect question to trap Jesus.
If he answered one way he would be in trouble with the state;
if he answered the other, he would be in trouble with the religious establishment.

But Jesus wasn’t afraid.
And because he wasn’t afraid he came up with the perfect creative response.
He didn’t answer.
Instead he turned the tables on them by asking to see the Roman tax coin they were talking about,
which meant that to produce it one of them would have to admit to having it
which meant they were breaking God’s law.
But they give him one and he asks another question: whose image is on this? Caesar’s.
Then render to Caesar that which is his, that which bears his image.
and render to God that which is God’s, that which bears God’s image.

The point of showing them the coin and pointing out the image on it was to remind them of who they were:
people created in the image of God.

Yes, they needed to pay their taxes, they needed to follow the law, they needed to comply with mandatory rules.
But that was all they owed the government. The rest of their lives belonged to God.

I find these words of Jesus tremendously helpful as we struggle to find our way
through the pandemic of fear that has gripped our world.
What should we do? How should we respond? What principles should guide our decisions.

For me, rendering to Caesar what is Caesar’s in this case means keeping the law.
By that I mean that if the president or governor or mayor
issues an executive order or actually mandates something –
no gatherings of over 250 people in CT for instance –
then we will have no gatherings of over 250.

But beyond those things that are mandated, there are a whole host of suggestions
that range from responses that are reasonable and rational and will probably be mostly helpful,
to overreactions that will probably have the unintended consequences of doing more harm than good.

So after we comply with the actual mandates,
how do we navigate through all the suggestions and guidance and advice?

The bottom line is that as people of God, we are called to live in faith and not fear.

That's our call. There is no way around it.

We are called to trust in the power and love of God. Period. We are called to "Fear not!"

God tells us not to fear because fear is not good for us, for many reasons. Let me give you just 4.

First, fear brings fearful things into our lives.

What we think about we bring about.

I already preached in this last week, so let me simply remind you

that if we are afraid something will happen, it's much more likely it will happen.

Specifically, the more afraid we are of getting sick,

the more stress we put on our immune system and the less effective our defenses will be.

The more fearful and anxious or depressed we are, the more susceptible we are to illness.

So first, fear can make us more susceptible to the things of which we are afraid.

Second, fear narrows our vision.

You've probably all heard stories of people who were held at gunpoint

and can't remember one thing about the person confronting them, because all they saw was the gun.

When we focus on a particular fear, we may miss many other dangers around.

There's nothing wrong with washing our hands, for instance, because that's not going to hurt anyone.

But there are other things that we are doing,

that, while they may protect people against the virus,

are going to place people in jeopardy in other ways.

If we shut down schools, what is the single mom who has an hourly job going to do?

If she stays home with her children, she could lose her job, or at least her income for the duration.

If food pantries and soup kitchens close down,

people may be forced to choose food over medicine and get sick,

or choose food over mortgage and lose their home.

Whenever we are faced with a crisis, we have a choice: we can react out of fear or respond with faith.

So first, fear makes us more susceptible to the things of which we are afraid,

and second, fear narrows our vision,

keeping us from seeing other dangers that may be just as great, or maybe even greater.

Third, fear paralyzes.

When we react out of fear, our minds are held captive and we can think of nothing else.

When we respond with faith, our minds are free and open to consider all kinds of responses.

In a crisis moment we need our minds to be free to think creatively

and come up with solutions that will not create more or greater problems.

So first, fear makes us more susceptible to the things of which we are afraid,

second, fear narrows our vision,

and third, fear paralyzes.

Fourth, fear is not a faithful response to God.

Over and over and over again, scripture tells us: Do not fear.

If we love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength,

if we put our trust in God,

if we believe that God is a God of power and love,

then we have no reason to fear.

Faith doesn't mean that we won't have challenges or that we won't suffer or that bad things won't happen to us.

It just means that no matter what happens, we trust that we are in God's hands.

I trust that I am going to stay well.

And if I get sick, I am going to trust that God will heal me.

And if I die, then I trust that I will still be in God's hands.

There are things the government has mandated and will mandate that we will do.
There are a whole host of things that government has said we have a choice to do or not to do.
How will we decide?
We will not react out of fear, but we will respond out of faith.
Reacting from fear will compound the fear, narrow our vision, paralyze our mission,
and compromise who we are as God's faithful people.
Responding from faith will keep fear at bay, widen our vision, free us to think creatively,
and enable us to witness to the world that our God is a God of infinite power and never ending love.

And one more thing - we will continue to love and care for one another.
If you are not well, stay home.
If you are elderly or immunocompromised and wish to stay home, please do. We will respect your decision.
If you wish to come to worship, please do. We will respect your decision.
Each of us is in a different place with regard to our physical health
and each of us is in a different place on a spiritual journey from fear to faith.
We are not here to judge or second guess anyone else's decision about how to live their lives.
We are here to encourage one another to practice good self-care, and to grow in faith.

For my part, if you get sick & are in the hospital & want me to visit and the hospital allows it, I will visit you.
If you self-isolate from crowds and stay home, but want me to visit you, I will visit you.
If you want to talk on the phone, call me.
If you want to write to me, email or text me.

I will render to Caesar's what is Caesar's. I will do what I am required to do.
But beyond that it is my intention to render to God what is God's – my life,
lived with as little fear and as much faith as I can muster.

I urge you, too, to let go of fear.
It will only bring what you fear closer, narrow your vision, paralyze you,
and sabotage your relationship with God and harm your Christian witness.

Instead hold onto faith.
And if that is difficult, remember the words of our first lesson today:
*There is no other god like you, YHWH, not one who can do what you do.
How great you are, Worker of Marvels; you alone are God!
Teach me your way, YHWH, so that I may walk with you alone; make me single-hearted*
Or recall the words of our gathering song.
*Our God is greater, our God is stronger, our God is higher than any other.
Our God is Healer, awesome in power, our God, our God!
And if our God is for us Then who could ever stop us?
And if our God is with us Then what could stand against?*

During this pandemic of fear, may these words strengthen your faith.
Let's shout them together.
*Our God is greater, our God is stronger, our God is higher than any other.
Our God is Healer, awesome in power, our God, our God!
And if our God is for us Then who could ever stop us?
And if our God is with us Then what could stand against?*

Not the coronavirus. Not fear. Not anything. Thanks be to God! **Amen**