

**Moth and Flame**  
**Sunday, December 19, 2021, 11:30 a.m., All Saints Church, Pasadena**  
**The Rev. Mike Kinman**

Hear the Gospel according to Aimee Mann:

“The Moth don't care when he sees The Flame.  
 He might get burned, but he's in the game.  
 And once he's in, he can't go back, he'll  
 Beat his wings 'til he burns them black...  
 No, The Moth don't care when he sees The Flame. . .

The Moth don't care if The Flame is real,  
 'Cause Flame and Moth got a sweetheart deal.  
 And nothing fuels a good flirtation,  
 Like Need and Anger and Desperation...  
 No, The Moth don't care if The Flame is real. . . ”

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Fear ... is the oxygen that feeds the flame we can't resist.

Fear .... is the oxygen that feeds the flame we are convinced we can't live without.

Fear ... is the oxygen that feeds the flame that burns us again and again.

Love ... is the breath that blows out the flame ... and sets us free.

It's been more than five years since I came here after nearly 30 years in the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri. Missouri is where I learned about addiction.

I was a college student when I went to my first diocesan convention, where the president of the standing committee stood up in his address and talked about the deep dysfunction that existed in the diocese but never got specific about why. I leaned over to my priest and asked him what he was talking about ... because I could tell there was a truth that nobody was saying. And he whispered to me, so low that nobody else could hear

“The bishop is an alcoholic.”

I remember being shocked and a little bit afraid. And it probably didn't seem too strange to me that those words were not being spoken from the podium. Back then, I thought addiction was a personal problem. At that point, what was not widely discussed is that addictions are never just about the individual but about a whole system. That addictions almost always have gateway traumas, individual and collective, wounds that are crying out for healing. And that you didn't even need to have someone in addiction's grasp still alive in the system for the dysfunction to continue.

Soon after, we elected a new bishop, an amazing, loving spiritual leader who exhibited no symptoms of addiction, and we thought the problem was solved. But the problem was never just the person. And so, the dysfunction remained in the system. The gaslighting. Enabling. Scapegoating. The idealizing. And most of all, the unspoken and, largely I believe, unconscious conspiracy of silence. Do not name the addiction. Do not speak the truth.

You see, truth is the most threatening thing to an addiction. Our addictions survive and thrive because we believe we will die without them. The truth teller exposes that for a lie. The truth teller reveals that the addiction is actually killing us, not helping us to survive. When we are in addiction's grasp, all we can see when confronted with truth is our life being threatened. When we are in addiction's grasp, there is nothing scarier than a truth teller. So, truth must not be spoken.

And the conspiracy of silence is always enforced by fear. And fear is instilled by coming down on the truth teller with incredible force – silencing them and letting everyone know that should you choose to try to speak truth, too ... you will be next.

I learned about addictive family systems when I went off to seminary. And yet when I came back to Missouri as a priest, I didn't say anything. I just kept my head down and tried to excel. Be what sometimes is called in addictive systems "the hero," often the oldest child who through their own overachieving will try to establish normalcy and distract from the dysfunction.

I was silent not out of ignorance ... but out of fear.

And I'm not beating myself up here. Fear is the power of the addicted system.

I was just playing my role.  
Ain't nothing but a family thing.

It wasn't until I got to Christ Church Cathedral and was confronted by an alcoholic system so overt that, with the help of courageous colleagues and congregational leaders, we finally felt compelled to name it, to bring in people to educate us that addiction is about systems and not just about one individual.

We named the addiction. We named some of the traumas of abuse that are so often the gateways to addiction. We tried to name these things not in shaming, accusing terms but in terms of healing and liberation. To have conversations about healthy relationships with alcohol. It was one of the most transformational moments I had experienced ... and it also provoked incredible wrath and an exodus of people from the Cathedral to communities where this truth would not be spoken and the addiction would remain safely unnamed.

Even as I stand here, I am still trembling sharing this story. More than five years and nearly 2,000 miles away, the fear is still right in here. Am I sharing a family secret? Will I get in trouble for saying this? Seriously that's what I'm feeling right now.

A few years later, when Michael Brown was murdered by the police, I watched courageous young, black, queer truth tellers take to the street and confront us with the White Supremacy that was killing them and imprisoning us all. And I saw how armed only with signs and voices, they were met with guns and batons. I saw how we blamed and shamed the victims. How we said at worst, this was about one or two "bad apples" ... they were the problem. This had nothing to do with the rest of us.

And I began to think ... this seems familiar.

And then I looked around at what was happening all over the country ... in Cleveland and Baltimore and Oakland and New York. I looked at our history as a nation. Southampton County to Tulsa to Selma and beyond, and I saw the same dynamics.

We talked about the American Dream and liberty and justice for all ... but in reality, the dream was economic, not civic and moral. And we were addicted to whatever keeps the money flowing and the white folks like me in power.

And then the pieces began to fall together. It wasn't just the Cathedral ... or the diocese or even St. Louis.

We are addicted to wealth, and power and the white supremacy that keeps it all going. This whole nation is an addicted family system.

And whomever tries to name it can be sure of one thing ... you will feel the pain.

For whomever tries to name it, the message is clear – be afraid. Be very afraid. Cause the pain is coming for you.

Moths and flames. Moths and flames.

Fear ... is the oxygen that feeds the flame that we can't resist.

Fear ... is the oxygen that feeds the flame we are convinced we can't live without.

Fear ... is the oxygen that feeds the flame that burns us again and again.

And ... Love ... is the breath that blows out the flame ... and sets us free.

It's a tale as old as time.

Fear imprisons. Truth liberates. And... fear does not give up easily.

It's a tale as old as time ... and certainly as old as this morning's Gospel reading.

You see despite appearances, not a lot has changed in the past 2,000 years. It was moths and flames then and it is moths and flames today. We become trapped in addicted systems that we are convinced are necessary for our survival even as they are killing and enslaving us.

It's not just alcohol and drugs. It can be relationships. It can be anything we fear our dependence on being exposed because it feels like if it is taken away, we will die. It feels like we have no choice.

In Mary's day, it was the power of Rome and the favor of the Emperor and the economic benefits he could provide if you fell in line and supported your own oppression that were the flame that trapped the moth again and again and again.

It didn't matter, as Gandhi would say to the British nearly two millennia later, that 100,000 English simply cannot control 350 million Indians if those Indians refuse to cooperate. The indigenous people far outnumbered their colonizers, and yet the power of fear and the temptations of the flame kept them in line.

Fear is the oxygen that feeds the flame that burns us again and again and again.  
And then along comes Mary.

Mary is not on Empire's radar screen. She is a young woman of color – three things together throughout history that have generally translated into being viewed as utterly inconsequential, the last person who will ever be expected to be a threat to the oppressive status quo.

The child at the dinner table who we never expect to say a word.

And yet God doesn't see as we see. God looks at Mary and sees strength. God looks at Mary and sees courage and power and vision. God looks at Mary and sees a prophet who can be the mother of God's revolution of love.

And so, God sends Mary a message: If you say yes, you are going to be the bearer of the one thing that Empiric addiction fears the most. You are going to be the bearer of the truth of the power of love. The breath that will blow out the flame ... and set all God's children free.

Into this system of oppression ... this system where the people were told it always had to be this way. Where they were kept in line with fear and by using their own people against them. Into this system, God comes and gives the truth of liberation to a young brown girl.

And ... Mary knows what will happen when she speaks her truth. Mary knows what will happen when she bears her truth. The system will slam down on her ... and even worse, on the truth bearer she bears.

“...and a sword will pierce through your heart also.”

Mary's heart is racing. And so, she runs... she runs and finds her tribe. She finds Elizabeth. She finds the one who shares her vision, who will recognize and affirm her, stand with her. Remind her she is not alone. Gabriel left her alone. Joseph couldn't be trusted not to act out of his own self-interest. She had to go find her fam.

And even before she can share her news, at the very sound of Mary's voice, the prophet child in Elizabeth's womb leaps for joy.

For courage knows courage.  
And truth recognizes truth.

And Elizabeth takes Mary, this one who is about to bear the one who will be despised, beaten and crucified.

Mary, whose future is the piercing of her own heart ... and Elizabeth takes her in her arms and calls her blessed ... and then for the first time, because she has tht community, because she has that affirmation ... Mary is able to sing her truth. The truth that not just Elizabeth but one day all generations will call her blessed, the mother of God's revolution of love. A revolution that will bring down the powerful from their thrones and lift up the lowly, that will fill the hungry from the banquet tables of the rich.

A revolution that will bring about the promised beloved community of God.

This morning's Gospel ends in this remarkable place of hope before the backlash. When truth has first been spoken and the vision of tomorrow is clear ... and yet before the blows have begun to rain down on the truth-teller's head.

That is where we end the Gospel reading this morning ... and that is not where we are living today.

We are living in the world of the backlash.

These are fearful times. This pandemic that seemingly will not end but keeps surging over and over again is not only filling us with fear and taxing us past exhaustion, it is exposing the fruits of our addiction.

We could have shared the formulas for the vaccines with the world as soon as they were developed, but the power of corporations to secure profits for themselves through intellectual

property rights was never questioned even in the face of millions of lives that could be saved. Nobody of consequence ever spoke up for that in any substantive way ... so effective have the forces of unfettered capitalism been on silencing the truth tellers of its impact.

After we dared elect Barack Obama, himself not even a radical but a slightly right of center moderate, our addicted society sent a message that the leadership and gifts of people of color in this nation would not be tolerated and so we got four years of Donald Trump – and an insurrection aimed at giving him four or eight or 12 years or more. And that was effective because the fear of him returning prevents us from speaking liberation truth even now. In the face of uprisings around the murders of George Floyd and far too many others, we have seen a backlash of attacks on voting rights and educational and economic opportunities for BIPOC persons.

In the face of the #MeToo movement and courageous women and nonbinary people stepping forward to tell their stories of the epidemic of sexual abuse in this nation, we have seen a backlash of attacks on women's health care and abortion rights in this country that is on the verge of returning us to back alleys and states like our own needing to prepare to receive the flood of women, nonbinary and trans persons who will need to travel here to receive the medical care that should be their most basic human right.

And ... And ... And our God is an on-time God. And she is providing a new generation of mothers for her revolution of love. Truth tellers like Jeanelle Austin. Patrice Cullors. Alexandria Occasio Cortez. Cori Bush. Ihlana Omar. Stacey Abrams. Dolores Huerta. Imani Barbarin. Zoey Luna. Blair Imani.

And they are finding each other ... and they are naming their blessedness and they are speaking their truth.

And they are paying the price. There is a special kind of cruelty to the backlash that is saved only for women and trans and nonbinary people.

They are telling the truth about all our addictions. About our addictions to white supremacy, capitalism, heteronormativity and limitless consumption that lead to our imprisonment in oppression, poverty, prejudice and which are destroying the planet's capacity to support life.

We are living in the backlash. And the message of all these backlashes is clear – be afraid. Shut your mouth. Don't name the addictions. Don't speak the truths that liberate. Certainly, don't talk about leading a revolution. Because if you do, we will bring the hurt for you ... and we know you are already hurting plenty already.

It is an effective strategy. It has been used to keep oppression in place. It has been used to preserve addictive systems for thousands of years.

And ... we gather on this fourth Sunday of Advent to say no more. To hear the echoes of the song of the mother of the revolution in the words of scripture and on the lips of those whom God has anointed to be this generations mothers of revolution. To affirm that the one to whom God came in the form of an angel and challenged her to bear a truth that would liberate us all still sings the truth beyond all truths:

That love is more powerful than the fear.

We walk with a revolutionary Jesus, and Mary is the mother of the revolution. And the Magnificat is her protest song. A song of such powerful truth that the same British whom Gandhi ran campaigns of noncooperation against banned it from ever being recited in public during their rule in India ... as, in the last half century, did oppressive regimes in Guatemala and Argentina.

The Magnificat is the anthem of God's revolution of love. And Mary ... Mary is the child at the dinner table who dares to speak the truth about dad's drinking, striking fear in all around because of the rage the family knows it will provoke.

She is standing up, pushing her chair back from the table and lifting her voice ... and we have a choice.

Do we let her stand alone?

Or are we Elizabeth? Do we recognize that we have our own prophets in us, ready to be born?

Can we feel them leaping in our wombs even as she speaks?

Will we have the courage to stand with the mothers of the revolution in our midst, to call them blessed, affirm their truth and join with them in their song of power?

We live in fearful times. That is not to be denied. The peril is real. The moth is heading for the flame and the moth don't care if the flame is real ...cause Flame and Moth got a sweetheart deal. And nothing fuels a good flirtation like need and anger and desperation.

The forces of backlash are calling us to fear. Because fear works.

Because Fear ... is the oxygen that feeds the flame that we can't resist.

Fear ... is the oxygen that feeds the flame we are convinced we can't live without.

Fear ... is the oxygen that feeds the flame that burns us again and again.

The fear is real. I'm not going to tell you it's not.

But fear does not get to win.

Because if we listen close, we can hear Mary singing.

And if together we have the courage, we can lend our voices to hers until the chorus is heard around the world.

For fear may be the oxygen that feeds the flame that burns us again and again.

But Love ... is the breath that blows out the flame ... and sets us free.

Amen.