

Fight, Flight, or Freeze

33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

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Fight, flight, or freeze– these are our typical reactions when under stress. Those who *fight* aggressively move toward the source, those who are inclined to *flight* quickly move away from the source, and those who *freeze* can't decide one way or the other. These are natural survival instincts built into our human nature from evolution. They do thankfully keep us alive, but they also prevent us from thriving. As the early Church father St. Irenaeus said, 'the glory of God is human beings fully alive.'

In today's Gospel, as we near the end of the liturgical calendar, we hear Jesus speaking about the end times. In it, Jesus predicts that the Temple will be thrown down, nation will rise against nation, and powerful earthquakes, famines, and plagues will occur. When thinking about this, most of us fall into one of the three categories. Some Christians present the end times as a great war in which we must fight the enemy and show no mercy. Others promote taking flight from our sinful world by storing up food and living in a bunker in fear to survive the end times. Still others freeze in indifference and don't know what to think of the end times, making them doubly unprepared. But returning to our Gospel passage, note that Jesus says when such things happen,

we are not to be terrified. He adds that he will give us the wisdom we need to handle it when the time comes. Even in spite of persecution, he believes that we will persevere through it.

As Christians, fight, flight, or freeze, while understandable, are not responses to life. They are merely reactions through life. To fully respond to the gift of life, instead of fight, flight, or freeze, we should be practicing the three Christian instincts of evangelize, contemplate, and discern. These three resemble fight, flight, or freeze, but are more in line with the Gospel.

- 'Evangelize' is like 'fight' in that there is a desire to move towards the source. However, it is much different in that it doesn't try to defeat or humiliate others, but to love and to save them. Under stress, we must be careful not to let our evangelization turn back into fighting with those who do not hold the same religious beliefs as us.
- 'Contemplate' is like 'flight' in that there is a desire to move away from the source. However, it is much different in that it doesn't try to escape from reality, but rather to give us space to make us more centered and objective. Under stress, we must be careful not to let our contemplation turn back into flight from our messy world.

- 'Discern' is like 'freeze' in that there is an uncertainty of what to do next. However, it is much different in that it doesn't make us neutral, but gives us the skills we need to choose the path more closely aligned with God's will. Under stress, we must be careful not to let our discernment turn back into freezing in indecisiveness.

Even in times of stress like the end times, we should not revert back to our survival instincts.

In what ways do our survival instincts make us more anxious about our problems? How can we better trust in God's providence in every circumstance and situation?

As we continue with this mass, let us approach the end of the liturgical calendar and the end times not with fight, flight, or freeze. Let us approach them with evangelize, contemplate, and discern. When we do this, we will be relieved to know that in God every ending is not an end, but rather simply a new beginning.