

Fear and Faith

Luke 12:32-40

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Without naming names, I will simply say that we have a sleep walker in our house. This person has been known to feed the pets at 2 in the morning, get dressed for the day, and argue loudly with another person who is talking in his sleep in another room down the hall. It's been an adventure, and sometimes a concern, wondering where this person might end up one night. I worry about that because I had a friend in college who woke up one night to find himself on the other side of town, and behind the wheel of his car, which was full of people. He couldn't for the life of him figure out how he had gotten there.

That may be the same thing the disciples were wondering when Jesus uttered the first words in our gospel reading: *do not be afraid*. How did we get here? Who said anything about being afraid? That guy just wants you to help him get his money.

Jumping in where we did this morning it seems like we should have moved on by now, but if you read all the way through you can see that Jesus is really still answering that man from last week who wants his brother to split his inheritance with him. He's widened the circle to include all the disciples in the conversation, but he's still on the topic of money. He's progressed from 'don't be greedy,' to 'don't *worry* about how you are going to survive and feed and clothe yourselves' to 'don't *be afraid*.'

Fear seems to be turning into a recurring theme of Jesus' actually. Earlier in chapter 12, just before he is asked to intervene in a family squabble, Jesus had given them another little sermon about fear, this time in the context of discipleship – they shouldn't be afraid to be bold Christians, bold about proclaiming their faith, bold about demonstrating their faith. Even if it gets them killed.

Jesus never comes right out and says it, but what he seems to be implying is that fear is a significant driving force in our lives. Not fear like a horror-movie kind of fear, but the little nagging sorts of fears that eat away at us and cause us to doubt and fret and be overly cautious and more than a bit paranoid. The kind of fear that sneaks its way in the door and before you know it, it has taken control of your life.

If you doubt me, if you think that that's a little dramatic, think of all those dire warnings that flood your email box. Just in the past few weeks I've received gotten alarming messages about a particularly horrible virus that will wipe out my hard drive and give hackers access to all my sensitive personal information. I've been warned that my social security is about to disappear, and even that I am in danger of receiving 3rd degree burns to my hand if I use my cell phone carelessly.

And then think of all the messages that the news media puts in your head that strike fear in our hearts:

Medical experts predict that, if we don't get our children off the couch and control their eating habits better, they will be the first generation ever that isn't expected to outlive

their parents. Immigrants are taking over the country. The Democrats are bankrupting the nation. The Republicans are paralyzing the government. Gun control activists are trying to take away our constitutional rights. The NRA is going to get us killed.

Think of the messages that the marketing media floods us with: if you don't do something about your acne or buy the latest clothes, your peers will laugh at you and you'll be a nerd. If you don't replace your kitchen countertops with whatever the latest material happens to be, you might as well still have shag carpet and avocado green appliances because no one will ever buy it and your property value will drop.

Even the church is guilty of broadcasting news that is intended to make us afraid – the end is near, and we'd better be ready or else, and if it happens that the end really isn't all that near, we're still in trouble because mainline churches are losing money and people, and Christianity in general is losing ground in the world. We are becoming an endangered species, so we'd better get on it or we'll be extinct in a half century and God-less Muslims will be running the world.

So what is it that we are so afraid of? What deep-down fears do all of those messages tap into and begin picking away at? You could probably sum it all up by saying that we are afraid that someone will take something from us: our rights, our dignity, our money, our freedom, our livelihoods, our lives. We are afraid that people will laugh at us; that we will not be in a position of power; that we will not be in control of our lives.

We live in protect and defend mode, we live with the expectation that someone – the government, the immigrants, the liberals, the conservatives, the communists, the Arabs, the poor, the rich, the popular kids – someone is going to do something to us, so we better be ready to stand our ground. The world is not a safe place, and we need to protect our turf, whether it's with guns or laws or big SUV's or words.

Maybe e-mail and electronic media didn't exist in Jesus' day, but all those same fears existed in their most elemental form. People were afraid that the world was a dangerous place, and that they had better arm themselves and be on the defensive.

Here we are, having a conversation we think is about money, about legal rights and inheritance laws, and the words of wisdom Jesus comes up with on the subject are, 'don't be afraid.' They're talking about what it's like to be a disciple of Jesus in a world that isn't particularly welcoming of them, putting it mildly, and what does he say? Don't be afraid. If he were sitting in our session meeting later today he would probably say that same thing to us when we got to the treasurer's report – don't be afraid. If he was watching the news with you, or sitting in the doctor's waiting room, or reading your e-mail, it would be the same thing – don't be afraid. Stand down, lay down your arms.

What he's trying to do is remind us to strain our eyes and focus on the barely-visible kingdom of God, not on the very frightening-looking world in front of us. *Strive for the kingdom*, he tells the disciples in verse 31. The kingdom where God's love and incredible grace are poured out on us. The kingdom where that same love and grace and justice are poured out by God's people. What he's telling us is to reorient ourselves – instead of living in fear, well-protected and defended

from a host of foes around us, live the life of the kingdom. Watch for signs of the kingdom. Don't feed the fears of this world, tell the stories of the other one to encourage you and keep you strong and bring that kingdom into clearer light.

Like the story of Abraham, who trusted that God would watch over him and provide that son that he promised.

Like the story of the early church, when they gathered to pray, break bread, and worship, and pool their resources so they could take care of each other's needs trusting that God would provide for their own.

Like the story of the Church that has survived for 2,000 years, not because we've always gotten it right, but because it is the Holy Spirit that has sustained it, sometimes through us, sometimes in spite of us.

Like the stories of faithful people who have brought this church where it is today. People who have loved our children and nurtured them to faithful adulthood. People who stepped out in faith and led us into bold new forms of mission, life-changing new ministries. People who have quietly and tirelessly served us and served God, often without notice and without thanks.

Tell the stories of people who strived for the kingdom, who have kept their eyes, their focus, on that sometimes barely visible kingdom of God, here on earth, and made it more visible to us.

What is it that keeps you up at night, or causes you to reach for the antacid, or has you wondering if you need a better stress-management plan? Whatever it is, Jesus' response will almost always be the same thing: *Don't be afraid, little flock – it is the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.* There's no need to waste precious time and energy protecting and defending yourself against enemies, real or imagined, that can't ultimately harm you. In fact, be shameless, unabashed optimists. Expect God's blessing. Look for God's kingdom. They are right there in front of you.