

Luke 12:32-40

August 11, 2019

Pentecost 9

Vicar Jonah Bruce

“Do Not Be Afraid”

May grace and peace be to you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”
(Luke 12:32)

This weekend marks my first independent pulpit supply sermon. I was terrified to preach that Sunday and to top it off, that first sermon was amidst great tragedy in the province of New Brunswick. As this weekend also marks the sorrowful one year anniversary of the tragic death of 2 police officers and 2 civilians in Fredericton New Brunswick. Prior to these events, much like Stratford, Fredericton was known as a quiet and safe community, a place where you never needed to worry because even though the news was full of violence and crime, that sort of stuff never happened so close to home. On that day, many searched, and now continue to search, for God amidst the lasting terror and fear of that event. Many still ask: God where are you? And many wonder how a God of love could allow such an unjust tragedy to occur. Both that weekend, and now a year later, many are tasked with the same challenge: Embracing Christ’s message to: “not be afraid” amidst circumstances that strongly suggest the need for a fearful response.

The world is filled with tragedy and hardship, with injustice and crime. People traveling to the United States are being warned to avoid large gatherings out of fear of gun violence, ICE continues to raid homes, and lives across the globe continue to be uprooted and disturbed. The news serves as a reminder that frightening events are closer to our communities than we sometimes like to think, and in light of all of this, the gospel of Christ could not be more relevant, as it begins this morning with the words: “do not be afraid.”

Today’s lectionary text picks up amidst Christ’s larger discord from his journey toward Jerusalem. It is a continuation of the Luke narrative that has been explored over the past couple of weeks, a narrative that perhaps highlights what it means to be true Disciples of Christ, a narrative that simultaneously offers hope and a challenge. Christ’s words in today’s reading come at the end of a discussion about the needlessness of worrying and in this section of the text, Christ encourages his Disciples to shift their focus and attention from the demands of this world and instead strive for God’s kingdom. For in seeking God’s kingdom, Christ promises that what is needed for this life will also be provided. And the reading for this morning adds to that conversation by reassuring listeners that God in fact wants to give his kingdom to his disciples. There is no need to worry or to be afraid because the kingdom of God welcomes and embraces all, the kingdom of God provides provision for this life and the kingdom of God offers eternal security beyond the parameters of this earthly realm.

But when faced with the reality of life, with the tragic injustice that exists both here and across the globe, it can become easy to worry and to be afraid. Fear is almost a natural response to the unfair circumstances of life, and so if you are anything like me, it might seem difficult to avoid worry and fear. But it is that natural tendency toward worry and being afraid that makes God's promise in and through Christ so powerfully relevant. God's reassurance in the gospel of Luke is perhaps less about what God demands and is instead about the comfort and hope that God provides.

In Luke's account of the nativity of Christ, the angel who appears to Mary also begins his proclamation with the phrase "do not be afraid." And that same message is heard in today's second reading where God speaks to Abraham, and again when Zechariah receives the wonderful news that his wife will give birth to John (Luke 1:13). Later, when the angel appears to the Shepherds, he once again proclaims: "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people, to you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord" (Luke 2:10). The gospel of Luke contains numerous examples of these instances in which the phrase "do not be afraid" is followed by the gospel message of what God promises in and through the gift of Jesus Christ. "Do not be afraid" is a pre-ambule to the hope that is provided in and because of Christ.

That perspective of hope is what sets the foundation for the remainder of today's narrative, where Christ encourages his disciples to "sell their possessions, and give alms" (Luke 12:33). Christ is calling his disciples to be generous and supportive of the poor, not that they themselves might become impoverished, but that those who are less fortunate might also recognize and participate in the abundance of God in and through their generosity and love. That Christ's disciples not wait to enter the kingdom of God, but that all people might come to experience and be a part of God's kingdom here on earth. This is what theologians refer to as the eschatological kingdom of God, that is, the kingdom of God that operates both here and now amidst the circumstances of this life. That is perhaps why the unexpected timing of the Son of Man is irrelevant for Luke. Rather than wait for the return of the Son of Man, the text is suggesting that followers of Christ help bring God's Kingdom on earth by living in a way that corresponds with the love and compassion shown through Christ.

Luther, heavily influenced by Augustine, argued that there were 2 kingdoms presently at work within the world: the spiritual kingdom of God and the kingdom of temporal authority. These two kingdoms also set the framework for Luther's theology of Law and Gospel. The spiritual kingdom of God handles matters such as faith and justification by grace through faith; it is God's way of meeting people in the hopelessness of sin and offering the hope of Jesus Christ. The kingdom of temporal authority, for Luther, is also under God's control, and constitutes the ordering of the world, such as political authorities or governments. Luther argues that both kingdoms stand side by side, serving as a means of God reaching out to God's children, meeting them wherever they are at. The spiritual kingdom provides a means of experiencing the love that is ours in Jesus Christ and the kingdom of temporal authority provides a means of implementing justice and bringing peace.

God, then, is present in all the world, with authority and with compassion, and the Disciples of Christ are likewise called to participate in what God is doing so that justice, peace, and love might be restored to and for all people. Or, as David Lose suggests in this week's "Working Preacher" submission: "What Jesus is commending is faith - faith that frees one to be generous; faith that enables one to leave anxiety behind; faith that creates in one confidence about a future secured not by human endeavor or achievement but by God alone."

Faith in Christ is what allows us to be generous and kind, it is what provides both motivation and the ability to give alms and to generously share what God has so graciously blessed us with. May it be money, time, abilities, talents, or other gifts, by faith, the children of God are called to give so that all might come to know the love that is ours in Christ Jesus. So that the kingdom of God might be seen actively at work as we participate in what God is doing. It is by that same faith, by that same trust in God, that all are offered the blessed assurance that there is never any need to worry or to fear, for God who is rich in love and mercy, promises to meet all needs, promises to care and to protect, just as he cares for the lilies of the field.

So, whether it be the people of Fredericton who continue to mourn and remember last year's tragedy, the people of the United States or other places across the globe who live in fear of violence and acts of hate, or we ourselves as we navigate the hardships, challenges, and uncertainties of this life, God through Christ offers the good news that there is no need to be afraid. For God rules over all the earth, presently suffers alongside of us, and takes great joy in making known to us the kingdom of God where all are welcome, all are fed, and fear need not exist.

"Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32). Amen.