**Genesis 15:1-6**
15:1 After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great."

15:2 But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?"

15:3 And Abram said, "You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir."

15:4 But the word of the LORD came to him, "This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir."

15:5 He brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be."

15:6 And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.

**Psalm 33:12-22**
33:12 Happy is the nation whose God is the LORD, the people whom he has chosen as his heritage.

33:13 The LORD looks down from heaven; he sees all humankind.

33:14 From where he sits enthroned he watches all the inhabitants of the earth--

33:15 he who fashions the hearts of them all, and observes all their deeds.

33:16 A king is not saved by his great army; a warrior is not delivered by his great strength.

33:17 The war horse is a vain hope for victory, and by its great might it cannot save.

33:18 Truly the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love,

33:19 to deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine.

33:20 Our soul waits for the LORD; he is our help and shield.

33:21 Our heart is glad in him, because we trust in his holy name.

33:22 Let your steadfast love, O LORD, be upon us, even as we hope in you.
Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16
11:1 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

11:2 Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval.

11:3 By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

11:8 By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going.

11:9 By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise.

11:10 For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

11:11 By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised.

11:12 Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, "as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore."

11:13 All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth,

11:14 for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland.

11:15 If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return.

11:16 But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

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

12:33 Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys.
12:34 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

12:35 "Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit;

12:36 be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks.

12:37 Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them.

12:38 If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves.

12:39 "But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into.

12:40 You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

We Are Gifted!

Let me start out by being 100% honest…I am a little leery of our gospel reading this morning. Any text that begins with the words, “Do not be afraid,” should be suspect. People usually do not say, “Do not be afraid,” unless there really is something of which you need to be afraid. I am even more leery of this morning’s reading from the Gospel of Luke because it adds the words “little flock” to the end of the phrase, “Do not be afraid, little flock…”

Call me crazy, but this addition feels to me to be the same as when many southerners tack the words “darling, honey, or baby” onto the end of a criticism to make their words not sound so harsh or judgmental. “That is some outfit, baby,” or “Oh, honey, that shirt really is blue,” means you better go right back to your closet and change your clothes because you look tacky. While “Darling, it’s just fine that you are late,” means you better not ever be late again or I won’t be here when you get here.

Most outsiders think these southern wordsmiths are being sweet, but those raised in the south know the truth – you just got word slapped in the face followed by a sweet smile and a quick cover up. So Jesus’ words, meant to bring comfort, immediately put me on edge. “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” Really? Just like that?

So what is it that we have to be afraid of here? I can think of plenty…the economy, the cost of healthcare, the bills that sit on our kitchen countertops wanting to be paid, how our children will grow up, the education system in America, global poverty, especially among women and children, hunger, countries collapsing, and war, just to name a few.
We often think that the people of biblical times didn’t have as much as we do to be afraid of, though, and that is simply not true. The people then were worried about the same things we are. Scholars often refer to Luke’s gospel as the “social gospel.” The author of Luke places an emphasis more than any other gospel writer on concern for the poor and underprivileged in society, especially those with lesser status – including women and non-Jews. He is especially concerned for those struggling for recognition, social justice and equality. This gospel gives us clues to the social ills of Jesus’ followers in the first century because it advocates for a redistribution of wealth and a society that cares for the poor, the sick, and those who are downtrodden. When the disciples look around and see so many to take care of, how could the they not be afraid --- the injustices were so great and the tasks to right them must have seemed so overwhelming? How can we not be afraid when anytime we open the newspaper or turn on the television to watch the news we see so much pain and devastation, so much horror and disappointment, so much death and destruction?

But for Jesus, it is that simple…do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Did you know that there are only two fears that people are born with? Fear of loud noises and fear of falling. That is it, only two. Everything else we fear, we learned to fear.

Fear of snakes…learned. Fear of spiders…learned. Fear of heights, water, and close spaces…both learned. Fear of people who look, sound, worship, or act different than us…all learned. Fear of failure and fear of success…both learned. Fear of dying…learned. Talk about scary, think of all of the different things we have learned to fear.

And Jesus says to his disciples, just as he says to us, “Do not be afraid.” What the heck is he talking about? We can’t unlearn all of this! We put a lot of time and energy into perfecting our fears. There are whole industries built around our fears.

But suppose we wanted to try…just how would we go about doing that? What’s the catch? I think the disciples must have been wondering the same thing. I can imagine the puzzled looks on their faces and the whispers as he was speaking to them “What is he talking about? Has he lost his mind?” We are lucky they were wondering the same thing because the next words out of Jesus’ mouth are an attempt to answer our questions.

He says, “Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

This answer is supposed to make it clear for us, but I am afraid it just muddies the water even more. See Presbyterians are from a tradition that proudly declares every Sunday morning that, “We are saved by grace through faith.” That means we believe there is nothing you have to do, or even can do, to receive God’s grace. It is God’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom because God wants to, not because of something you did or did not do, not because you pray, or come to church, or volunteer at a soup kitchen, or give
money to the poor. The good news is that there is nothing you can do to earn the kingdom or to lose your inheritance of it.

But this text appears to say something else entirely. I think sometimes the line between doctrine and heresy is very, very fine, so I must tread carefully here. All too often our Reformation understanding and theology that “there is nothing we have to do” becomes skewed, and turns into “there is nothing we should do.” Strict interpretation of our theology of “saved by grace through faith” can lead us down the slippery slope of complacency if we are not careful. But believing in the assertion that God does indeed want us to do things, and that God wants us to live a life of discipleship does not have to threaten our Reformation theology.

The way I see it is that God gives us the kingdom as a gift. According to the Webster-Merriam Dictionary, a gift is something voluntarily transferred by one person to another without compensation. That means a gift cannot be earned, only generously given and gratefully received. Saying “we don’t have to do anything to earn God’s love” does not mean we shouldn’t do anything in response to God’s love. Having the gift of God’s grace should not make us feel safe in the sense that we sit inside our homes or our churches, among our own, never venturing out. Presbyterian theologian William G.T. Shedd said it well when he made the analogy, “A ship in its harbor is safe, but that is not what ships are for.” And that is not what Christians are for either.

In our gospel reading this morning, the author of Luke is making sure that we understand God’s promise of unconditional grace. Jesus tells us not to worry, not to be anxious about our relationship with God because God wants to gift us with acceptance and forgiveness. We are freed FROM anxiety regarding our relationship with God. Jesus also tells us that that we should make purses for ourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys, and that where our treasure is, there are hearts are also. So, we are also freed FOR life in this world – a life of discipleship and gratitude. We are freed from fear and anxiety and we are freed for life -- these two things together are the heart of the gospel promise. We are freed from the fear of scarcity so we can give generously. We are freed from the fear of condemnation so that we can freely forgive others. We are freed from the fear of failure so that we can help others succeed. We are freed from the fear of not measuring up or being acceptable so that we can help everyone stand tall and know they are loved. We are freed from the fear of not having enough knowledge, enough spirituality, enough wisdom, so that we can share with our neighbors the good news that it is God’s good pleasure to give us – all of us---the kingdom. Friends, we truly are gifted!

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