

Sermon for Sunday, August 7, 2016
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

Do not be afraid.

That's how
our gospel reading begins this week.
Do not be afraid.

And it comes in a time
in our lives
when fear is part of everyday rhetoric.
Just take a look at the front pages of the newspapers today.

The New York Times has stories about
political turmoil, war in Syria, and low economic growth.
Newsday, depending which edition you get, has gun seizures
or extortion, arson and credit fraud.
And further back in the papers
we're reminded
of the shootings in Orlando,
another stabbing in Belgium by someone who seems to be an extremist,
and a fire in Rouen that had people assuming another terrorist attack.
Meanwhile,
in these dog days of summer,
those heading by air for a welcome break
begin their vacations with armed military on patrol
and ever more vigilant security screening,
and on Thursday,
when I was out having coffee with my ten-year-old goddaughter who is visiting from
Australia,
I kept hoping she wouldn't see the gun
visible in the holster of the cop at the coffee table next to us.
It might have made her feel safer, but I suspect it was more likely to have made her
afraid,
a visible sign of the risk of violence.
Don't talk to strangers,
never pick up a hitchhiker,
make sure the doors of your home are locked.

We live in a culture
where fear is rampant.

And into this culture
we hear Jesus saying,
“Do not be afraid.”

It’s a refrain
that we’ve heard
time and time again throughout scripture.
God says “Do not be afraid”
to the forefathers of the people of God,
Abraham and Isaac and Jacob,
to Abraham’s wife’s servant, Hagar, mother of Ishmael,
and to Jacob’s dearly beloved wife, Rachel, mother of Joseph and Benjamin,
and to that baby rescued from the bulrushes
become leader of the captive Israelites out of slavery,
Moses.
“Do not be afraid.”

We’ve heard it
as the leaders of the new nation speak to their people,
Joshua and Samuel and David,
and the prophets speak for God to the people,
Elijah and Elisha,
Isaiah and Jeremiah,
Ezekiel and Zechariah.
“Do not be afraid.”

The angel to the elderly priest, Zechariah,
promising a son to be called John,
and another angel to Joseph,
this son Emmanuel,
and to young Mary, who has found favor with God,
bearer of that son, Jesus.
“Do not be afraid.”

And Jesus himself to his followers,
calling Simon and Andrew, James and John
to join him in fishing for people,

and walking towards them across the lake,
and on the mountain of transfiguration,
“Do not be afraid.”

And the angel at the tomb
to the women,
and Jesus himself,
“Do not be afraid.”

Fifty nine times in Scripture:
It’s a stark contrast
to much of what we hear around us.

“Do not be afraid.”
And today, today these words
as we read them in our gospel
have a particular resonance.
Because unlike many of the times
when these words are spoken,
time when God appears dramatically
or great threats appear,
this time
in the gospel
they are said in the context
of ordinary
life.
Well, relatively ordinary, anyway.
Jesus has been traveling around the countryside,
preaching and healing.
And he’s drawn great crowds, thousands of people
all clamoring to hear him.
And in this section of Luke
he switches back and forth
between talking with the crowds at large
and talking with his own small band of disciples.
But all the time
he is speaking
about how it is
that they are to live
as the people of God,

what it means
to follow him.

And this conversation all seems to begin
with someone in the crowd,
who sees how well respected Jesus is
and wants him to be arbitrator
in a family fight.

“Teacher, tell my brother to share my father’s inheritance with me.”

But Jesus wants no part of it.

“I’m not your judge.”

And then goes on,

“Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

And he tells the parable
of the rich man

who was so successful with his farm businesses
that he began to run out of room to store all his produce.

So he decided to build a new silo.

That way

he could store up enough
to live the rest of his life
in luxury.

Except the rest of his life
wasn’t going to be very long.

He was going to die that very night.

And what use to him

would all those stored up goods be?

And Jesus says,

“So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.”

And then Jesus goes on to say to his disciples

“Don’t worry about what you are to eat, or wear. Doesn’t God provide
for the birds and the flowers?

And aren’t you more precious to God
than they are?

God knows

what you need.

Strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.”

And then come the words
we heard today.

Jesus said to his disciples, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. 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.”

We'll come back to that a little later.

Jesus goes on
to tell a couple more parables,
parables
that at first glance
look like the ones he tells
when he is predicting his death,
predicting his coming again.

Be watchful,
like slaves waiting for their master to come home
or a house owner
keeping an eye out
in case someone comes to steal something.

And all the way through, all the way through
the question Jesus is asking is,
the challenge is,
are you obsessed
with the things around you,
or do you have one eye on
the kingdom of God?

And the heart of it all
is those words that I said we'd come back to.
“Do not be afraid.”
Because of course,
all this talk
of trusting God to provide for us

does make us anxious.
We want to be sensible.
We want to provide for ourselves.
We want to be ready for a rainy day.

And at the other end of it all,
we're not sure we want to be waiting
like a servant for their master
or a homeowner for a thief.
We don't want to live our lives
in perpetual uncertainty.
And we're not really sure
we are comfortable with the idea
that Christ could interrupt our lives
at any moment.

So lets go back to those words, "Do not be afraid."
Do not be afraid, says Jesus, because God has given you everything.
Everything you have
is a gift from God.
You might have worked for it,
you might have worried over it,
but still,
it is a gift, a blessing.
If you keep your eyes - or one eye at least -
focussed on God,
everything else
will be okay.
Just put God first,
out God at the center,
and everything else
will fall into place.

He's not necessarily at this time,
telling them to sell everything.
But to sell something
and give to the poor.
Something
that you have hoarded.
Something

that you have held close.
Something
that might be hiding you back
from the riches
that God has to give to you.

You see, this is about where our focus is.
Are we grasping things tight,
busy counting
to make sure nothing
is lost,
or are we looking around us
to see where God might be at work,
where we might be at work
on behalf of God?

Because God
is a God of abundance.
God is a God
who is constantly giving,
constantly blessing.

But we live
in a world of scarcity.
A world where
we're never quite sure
that there will be enough.
Enough money.
Enough jobs.
Enough safety.
And so we live
in a culture of fear.

But, Jesus says,
"Don't be afraid."
Give generously.
Don't hold on too tight.
Because there is enough.
There is more than enough.
So keep your eyes on God.

Keep looking up.

Keep looking out.

See where God is at work,

and be ready to join him,

ready to join Christ

in the work of blessing. Sermon for Monday, February 2, 2015

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