

Be Not Afraid

Gen 15: 1-6, Lk 12: 32-40

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Emma S baptism

Blessing of school supplies

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Genesis 15:1-18

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.” 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?” And Abram said, “You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.” 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.” 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.” And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Luke 12:32-40

“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. “Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; 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. 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. If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves. “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. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

What happens when someone says to you, “don’t be afraid?” Don’t you immediately think, “Ughh oh. What’s going on, what happened?” Do you feel your blood pressure creep up a bit, your muscles tense and your stomach do a flip flop? Does your mental antennae go up to prepare for bad news or pain? Do you begin a rapid mental litany of things that you are afraid of? ‘Do not be afraid’ is not heard as a comforting phrase but as a warning to be on guard. This is going to hurt. And when it is God who tells us to not be afraid, the anxiety those words awaken in us what now sounds like a command, a reprimand. ‘Thou shalt not be afraid!’

Yet God’s message to not be afraid is sincere and encouraging rather than threatening. Nearly 120 times in the bible God calls us to not be afraid, and each time it is a situation when it would be absolutely human to be anxious, concerned, unprepared, and afraid. God’s words are meant to be soothing, inspiring and an acceptance of the feelings and emotions that we are

experiencing. This is actually the most frequent advice in the bible. These were the words to the Israelites fleeing Egyptian bondage through Moses' saving leadership. These were the words of annunciation to Mary when she learned that she would be the mother of God's son, the words to Joseph when he almost walked away from his pregnant fiancée, the words when the disciples fell to the ground as Jesus was transfigured in their presence, the words when Jesus walked on water, and when the early church faced infighting and persecution.

To be afraid, to be fearful and anxious, can be paralyzing and numbing. We may not think clearly, act appropriately, but instead become lost, bewildered and hopeless. When God spoke to Abraham, when Jesus spoke to his followers, 'do not be afraid,' this encouragement was followed by good news and guidance. The childless Abraham would indeed have countless descendants. The followers of Jesus know God's pleasure of giving the kingdom.

There was a path for Abraham to follow, a path that along the way did have unnerving, challenging experiences, but the loving grace of God encouraged and strengthened him. We, as are countless others across generations, children of Abraham.

And there is a path to follow, a path that along the way will have unnerving, challenging experiences, but the grace of God, the teachings of Jesus and the guidance of the Spirit encouraged and strengthened the disciples then and continues for all the followers of Jesus Christ.

Jesus prepares his followers for the path with a little instruction manual.

Don't be afraid. When we face challenges, concerns, injustices, don't be trapped by fear that freezes you, but rather know that you are held and encouraged in something much greater than what surrounds you in the moment. Step back in faith, then you can think clearer, act responsibly, share generously, focus on what really matters and feel better prepared for that unexpected hour when you are needed.

Don't be afraid. You have been given much—you have been given hope, strength, encouragement, mercy, grace and love, and you know this. As servant people of faith we have been entrusted with these gifts, these skills, and so the call, the demand, to use them.

Yes, we have been given hope, strength, encouragement, and all the other intangible blessings of faith. But we live in a world and a time when gun violence happens often enough that even very young children are prepared with school shooting drills, when racism is alive and well, when the war in Afghanistan thrives, when drug addiction takes the lives of those who should be young and vibrant, and when immigration separates families because we can't find a healthy way to respond to those seeking shelter and safety in the US.

Faith tells us 'do not be afraid.' The news however tell us to 'be afraid, be very afraid.'

How then do we live by faith *and* in a world that is scary? How can we be afraid *and* not afraid at the same time?

The Nobel prize winning poet Tagore offered this advice, "Let me not pray to be sheltered from dangers, but to be fearless in facing them. Let me not beg for the stilling of my pain, but for the heart to conquer it." The world can be dark and ominous and threatening, leaving us in fear and worry, but when our response is to fight for, work for, pray for, justice, healing and hope then we are being brave and courageous. We might be scared but courage and bravery mean acting even when we are scared. That is how faith strengthens us to not be afraid, intimidated, and pushed to back down. Facing up to, standing up to, what scares us in this world, to what is wrong, unfair and unjust, even when we are shaking in our shoes, dry mouthed from nerves and determined to resist the urge to run away, cover and hide, is the faith that makes us unafraid to act.

Muslim-American author Nafisa Haji, in her book, *The Writing on My Forehead*, sums it up for us this way, "...there are many things that we can't understand, the past, the bad things that happened... and we become afraid. of what might happen in the future. It's okay to be afraid. but we have to keep hoping and believing... to keep hoping and trying our best to be good and do good. even when we're afraid"

To keep hoping and believing and trying our best to be good and do good, even when we're afraid.

Hoping, believing and doing our best for the good means that we come together as a congregation, as a church, offering prayers in the form of words and actions and education and financial support to contribute to the many needs and issues around us.

Hoping, believing and doing our best for the good means that we come together as a congregation, as a church, and welcome little ones into the family of faith. We gathered together today, as parents, grandparents, godparents and a community to baptize Emma as a beloved child of God, to welcome her into a community where we cannot promise that life will always be good, just and fair, but we all sincerely promised that we want that world for her and for all of us. Wanting that world means that we work towards that world with the help, grace and love of God, no matter how much our knees are shaking, because God always goes before us to lead, guide and encourage us. Amen.