

## NINTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | AUGUST 7, 2022

GENESIS 15:1-6 | PSALM 33:12-22 | HEBREWS 11:1-3, 8-16 | LUKE 12:32-40

Our Hebrew Bible reading and gospel text both begin with the same admonition. “Be not afraid.” That word is spoken to Abram. It’s spoken to Jesus’s disciples. And it’s spoken to all of us.

And not without reason. After all, we are afraid. We are afraid of the violence in our world and our nation. We are afraid of how the climate crisis will affect our lives. We are afraid of losing rights and losing work. We are afraid of failure in our private concerns and public life. We know what it means to be afraid.

The problem with fear is not simply the strain it presses on us now—the sleepless nights, the strained relationships, the dread kept on a low boil—than how it constrains our vision for the future. We fear rejection, so we stop loving. We fear failure, so we stop trying. We fear death, so we stop living.

There is, as always, a shortsighted, self-serving way to read this invitation. To take God’s admonition not to fear as an invitation to indifference. There are no shortage of people, Christians no less, who will tell you that an reasonable precaution you might take in life from vaccines to life insurance means you’re giving into fear. And there are others who use this invitation to justify their complacency toward the world around them. The climate crisis might be bad, but God says not to be afraid, so let’s just see how it pans out. What both groups are doing is pretending to live without fear when all they’re doing is living without responsibility.

But you know better. The invitation to not be afraid doesn’t give us a “Get Out of Public Life Free” card. Just the opposite. God gives us a different energy, a different source, to live from. And the word we use for that energy, that power God gives each and every once of us, is faith.<sup>1</sup>

Faith is not belief. It is not knowledge. It is not certainty. It isn’t about whether hypothetical theories might be plausible. Belief is all about trust. It simply means a trust that, as Jesus says, it is God’s pleasure to give us the kingdom. God’s intent, God’s dream if you like, from “in the beginning” all the way to the new Jerusalem is all aimed at bringing the kingdom of God into our lives and the life of our creation.

So we never come before God in fear.<sup>2</sup> Reverence, sure. Humility, you bet. But never fear. Because we know it is God’s desire to graft each and every one of us into wholeness and peace that we call the kingdom of God. Instead of creating fear in us, God creates faith.

Faith gives us the energy, the sustenance, the drive to live out our vocations as individuals and our mission as the body of Christ in this place. Faith is not a trust that bad things are never going to happen. Or that death isn’t real. Or that failure isn’t a possibility. They will. It is. And it’s a real possibility. Only that God keeps giving us the kingdom anyway.

As Henry James once wrote, “Our life is always deeper than we know, is always more divine than it seems, and hence we are able to survive degradations and despairs that would otherwise engulf us.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This is Article III of the Creed from the Small Catechism. “...I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith...”

<sup>2</sup> The Small Catechism uses “fear, love, and trust God” frequently, but “fear” is associated with awe, not terror.

<sup>3</sup> Henry James, *Christianity: The Logic of Creation* (AMS Press, 1857). Quoted from John Kaag, *Sick Souls, Healthy Minds: How William James Can Save Your Life* (Princeton University Press, 2020).

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It doesn't always seem that way. It doesn't seem like our lives have much depth to them. It doesn't always feel like every moment is shot through with the divine life. But they are, if only we had the eyes to see it. And that's exactly why God gives us the gift of faith. So that we can trust in "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." We live not simply in accordance with what is apparent but with what the resurrection of Jesus has made possible.

Few of us talk about fear and faith explicitly, but it's latent in our language. Fear uses language of "just." You notice that's how Abraham equivocates in today's story. I'm just childless. I'm just someone without an heir. Fear minimizes the gifts that God gives us. I can't make a difference because I'm just X. That community isn't worthwhile because it's just Y. This congregation can't live into its calling because it's just Z.

But faith uses language of "so that." Faith turns everything out toward our neighbors. I have been given these talents so that I can help X. This community exists so that Y. This congregation inspires, strengthens, and gives hope so that Z. You notice that when God wants to show Abraham the scope of his vocation, God takes him outside and draws his attention to the stars. God literally and metaphorically expands Abraham's horizon. Whenever we want to minimize, to constrain, or to lessen, God always expands our vision for ourselves, one another, and our world. God puts faith over fear.

One last word about this Genesis story. We often talk about Abraham as a model of our faith. The letter to the Hebrews talks about him that way. Luther talks about his faith as an inspiration for our own faith.<sup>4</sup> But what do you notice about Abraham's faith in this story? It doesn't come all at once. Abraham's initial reaction is disbelief. And, my favorite part of the story, God doesn't respond to his protests, leaving Abraham to awkwardly fill the silence by coming up with even more misgivings. Abraham is the model of faith over fear, but it doesn't happen immediately.

That's exactly how God's gift of faith works in us. It doesn't just change our experience of life from thunder to rosebuds in an instant. But it works on us over time. So if you're someone who feels somewhere between fear and faith—and that's all of us—that doesn't mean you're a failure or you're weird or you're broken. To be a "person of faith" doesn't mean that you have everything worked out. It simply means that you are someone that God is leading toward the kingdom. And that includes all of us.

And if that sounds like some new-agey stuff, it's not. That's the whole reason we have liturgy. Because we need to be reminded of this again and again and again. Every word of promise you hear spoken in worship, Your sins are forgiven, The word of the Lord, the Body of Christ given for you, Go in peace and serve the Lord, is really repeating what Jesus says. Be not afraid. But have faith. And as we're sent from this place to continue God's mission in the world begun here, we speak those same words through our lives and witness as we live out our vocations.

Be not afraid. Trust that it is God's good pleasure to give you and all of creation the kingdom.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

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<sup>4</sup> There's a summary and some citations in Robert Kolb, *Luther and the Stories of God: Biblical Narratives as a Foundation for Christian Living* (Baker Books, 2012), 72.