

Luke 12: 32-40 To fear or not to fear

The sermon title this morning sounds like a play on a famous Shakespeare quote from Hamlet: To be or not to be, that is the question. But the title and the quote both reflect on a reality of our lives—we make choices. Of course the choices we make are often not as clear cut; they don't seem to be either or situations, but rather a pick one out of many options—or at least so it seems; or so we rationalize it to be. Not every situation we face in life calling for a choice presents itself as either black or white, this or that. But in our lectionary passages today, both the gospel and the epistle passage indicate that all our choices need to have some things in common: a certain set of priorities about what is important in life and a willingness to trust in God. Another famous and more modern quote related to fear was by Franklin Roosevelt who put it this way: “The only thing to fear is fear itself.” This is a quote from his first inaugural speech in 1932 as the nation faced the Great Depression and hard times. I am not sure many people listening to him agreed that fear was all that they had to fear. The climate of our culture these days seems to be one which is designed to produce fear in us—especially fear of others. So the question: to fear or not to fear is very relevant. Our Luke passage opens this way: “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” When this passage is proclaimed, often the emphasis is on what follows not the opening assurance, but what seem to be requirements. It is either about—“sell your possessions...” or the sense of urgency found in “you must be ready.” If we focus on the “sell your possessions and give alms” portion of the text we wonder just how we are to live without those possessions. Our possessions tend to be what we trust to secure our future. We use them as a buffer against fear of the future. In many ways they are a security blanket. As we considered last week, the injunction of Jesus is against greed which gives possessions power over our lives to the detriment of our relationship with God and each other; this passage thus contains another caution about our tendency to invest too much of our trust in treasures that can be lost, stolen or just lose the value or ability to provide the security we seek. Because if possessions are where our heart’s treasure is, when something happens to those things, we are left desolate. And since we know that things can easily happen to those material things, we worry. If we place that injunction about possessions into the context of this Lukean passage’s opening verse: “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” then perhaps our perspective becomes different. Anchored by the promise that God wants to give us all good things, we can hear this command differently. God wants us not to be beset by worries, to keep our priorities straight, to not be consumed by greed or love of those things we accumulate that do not bring real happiness and which can indeed become a burden as we try to maintain and increase them. Ironically often the more we accumulate the more we worry about possible loss. Rather God wants us to have and enjoy and share the abundant life that comes from authentic community and right relationships with God and each other. The second injunction in this passage which calls for us to be ready; to be dressed for action and have your lamps lit does carry with it a sense of urgency—not to be caught unaware when Jesus shows up. Again, our introductory verse reminds us that it is God’s good pleasure to give to us the kingdom; it is a gift which means we do not and cannot earn it. So why does Jesus give us a

sense that it would be bad if we are not prepared for the return of the master, in this case, Christ. That urgency is there because although we don't earn God's grace and mercy there is a false dichotomy created between the idea of not having to do anything to earn God's love and the fact that we shouldn't do anything in response to God's love. In fact, human beings are forever creatures in motion, restless from birth and finally still only in the grave. We will do something. We can't help but act, will, be, and do. The question is not whether we will do something but is instead **what** will we do and **why** will we do it. Our penchant is to justify ourselves because at heart we are insecure and always a little desperate to assert our independence. God's promise of acceptance and forgiveness can be unsettling, even frightening. We feel it is much better to have something of our own to fall back on—a spark of goodness in ourselves, the claim that we invited Jesus into our hearts, a few good works, a hefty bank account—anything other than total dependence on God's sheer mercy. When we assert God's unconditional grace that is only half of the story—the part that frees us from anxiety about our relationship with God. This grace also frees us for life in this world—we are freed from the cultural claim that scarcity dominates the world so we can then be generous with others. We are freed from the fear of condemnation so that we can forgive others. We are freed from the fear of falling short, of failing, of being unacceptable so that we can live for our neighbors, sharing with others the good news that God is pleased to give us—all of us—the kingdom. We are also able then to maintain a close relationship with God without the distraction of other things in our lives which we value more than that relationship. In the epistle reading from Hebrews we have a description of faith. Hebrews 11:1 is well known and is often used like a motto on mugs, T-shirts and stationary. It is very concise and easy to remember: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." That seems clear enough, but because we usually take it out of the context in which it was delivered, we might not truly get the point. Throughout scriptures—both testaments, Abraham is held up as a model of faith. He is a righteous man. We often get the picture of a man who lived entirely by hope in the promises made to him by God. Certainly, Abram leaves Ur with no questions asked; not even about the destination as God simply tells him to pack up and go to a place which God will show him—later. Several times in Abraham's life, he seeks to "aid" God in the fulfillment of the promise of land and heirs. These efforts do not gain him what he desires, but the journey with God continues. Abraham's relationship with God allows him to take the promised heir, Isaac and bind him on an altar when God commands it. Isaac is not sacrificed, but Abraham never lives to see the numerous heirs or their possession of the land. The land does not become the possession of Abraham's heirs until the descendants of his grandson Jacob leave Egypt where they have been enslaved. These descendants roam in the wilderness for forty years. The text of Hebrews uses the story of Abraham and others who lived by faith. It tells of those who live so entirely by hope in God's promises that nothing in the world around them can prevent them from moving forward in their spiritual journey, their hearts are set on the promises they have from God. Those who are brought forth in Hebrews as examples of faith died in faith without having received the promises, but they lived into them. That is what we are also called to do—to live into the good news that Jesus gives us: "Do not be afraid little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." Thanks be to God.

