

Second Sunday of Advent
Wicker Park Lutheran Church
Vicar Paisley Le Roy
November 18, 2019

What a comforting reading! Jesus says... “Do not be terrified.” “Do not be terrified.”

He then lists quite a few things I know that I am terrified of: earthquakes, famine, war, my parent turning against me, being arrested, dying, but he says, “Do not be terrified.”

The truth is we have plenty to be terrified of. Take just this week’s news. We observed Veteran’s Day where we gave thanks for all those who have served during times of peace and times of war. Though, of course, it is important to give thanks, it’s a reminder that the reality of war still surrounds us. In Santa Clarita a teenager celebrated his sixteenth birthday by walking into his school, killing two of his classmates and injuring three others before taking his own life. Friday marked the 65th week of the Youth Climate Strike where school-aged children are fighting for the future of our very planet - instead of being in the classroom where they belong. We entered into a trial that might lead to impeachment - something that many folk on either side fear could be the final straw in the great schism that has divided our country - and perhaps even our families - more than ever. Protests continue in Hong Kong and Paris, just to name a couple. There is a lot to be terrified of.

And that’s just on the news. There’s even more in our personal lives: difficult diagnoses, job loss, food and housing insecurity, death of a loved one. There is a lot to be terrified of.

So, Jesus, how can you say “do not be terrified,” when these things are happening all around us?

Now, it's important to remember the Gospel of Luke is written after the destruction of the Temple so the writer was aware that “not one stone will be left upon another,” because he or she or they had lived through its destruction. And also, the same writer knew deeply the struggles that were to face Jesus' beloved friends after his death, after the destruction of the Temple - the very place God was said to be reside - after their lives had gotten turned upside-down. *The writer knew*, and we know the writer knew because “Book II,” if you will, is the Book of Acts, written by the same author who wrote our Gospel for today. The Book of Acts that we are studying for Third Sunday Teaching, tells of the spread of the gospel through the work of the apostles but also tells of the trials they faced through that vocation. They were arrested. They were rejected by many. And yet, they persevered through this time of great adversity because, through the gift of the Spirit, they were able to testify. Take Stephen, for example, one of the seven chosen to serve, who, even in this time of adversity, did great wonders and signs (6:8). This upset the people in power and they spoke against him, but as today's text says, “they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke (v. 10 connection with Luke 12:15).” Now Stephen would be put to death but he kept the faith and even prayed for his even enemies in death.

All of this to say, the writer of Luke knows very well of the destruction that has taken place and the trials that the followers of Christ have been subjected to since. Yet even in all of that, even in the stoning of Stephen, the Lukan Jesus tells us, “do not be terrified...you will not perish...you will gain your soul.”

My glimmer of hope this week was through a story of resistance. The movie Harriet tells the story of the enslaved girl Minty who escaped slavery and travelled one hundred miles alone through dangerous land to the freedom of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania by following the light of a star by night and the sound and sight of flowing water by day. She amazed others by her solo travel. Some didn't believe that she had made the journey alone. She made it but her own freedom was not enough so she, against the advice and command of others, returned to where she had been enslaved and brought nine back to Philadelphia with her.

Though she could see the violence around her, though she could see the system of slavery in which she had *no* power, though she faced torture and death each time she returned to the south, she continued. Without spoiling the movie (which I highly recommend you see), I'll tell you that my favorite part was seeing her confidence grow and seeing how she could move people through her speeches. As the south increased its number of slave hunters and many conductors of the Underground Railroad wanted to call it quits, Harriet had the audacity to bring a testimony of hope that convinced them to keep fighting. To do what seemed impossible.

One gospel commentator said, "The opportunity to testify during times of destruction is, in part, the audacity to muster courage in the face of fear and boldness to speak in the face of suffering. Great suffering changes some people and defeats others, but for those who endure - their very souls are gained (Nancy Lynne Westfield, Feasting on the Word)." It was clear that Harriet fully believed Jesus' promise from today's Gospel..."You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls (v.16-19). Harriet, by this time, was the most wanted "criminal" in the south. Slave

owners wanted her dead. And yet she trusted in the visions God had given her and found faith in herself through them. She had so much to be terrified of, but she persevered and testified.

That, my friends, is what we are called to in the face of evil and destruction. We are called to “not be terrified” and also *to testify to the hope that we have in Jesus Christ*. We did this collectively today as we rejected evil and professed our faith but we have been given the power to do this in every space: to speak words of hope and peace into a world that often feels like it is falling apart. Hope in the midst of gun violence, climate change, impending trials, protests, disease, and death.

But, let’s be honest, testifying to that hope - speaking that word of truth to power - seems impossible. It seems, well, terrifying. And that is where the good news from today’s passage comes into play. We don’t have to have the words. We don’t have to try to figure out the words. All we need is to receive the gift of Christ’s word that is spoken through us in the face of evil and destruction. It is this word and wisdom given to us that sustains us. And, even more, we are given a tangible reminder of that promise: the gift of community. A community that uplifts but also challenges one another. This community that Christ has brought together and that we, together, have built. A community in which we know that we have a place of solace when we are terrified.

It is in this community we receive further reminders. The reminder of our baptism where God claims us and, soon, the gift of God’s own body and blood that strengthens us to continue testifying hope, the hope that these terrifying things will not have the last word.

And so, with these reminders we get to leave this place to testify to the hope that can be found through Christ. Knowing that we are not alone, that Christ watches over us and the Spirit works through us, may we be bold to speak in the face of suffering. To speak for ourselves and to speak for others when given the opportunity. God promises protection; God promises that we will not perish. And so we are given not only the space to speak but also the words to speak so that we have the gift of working towards God's kingdom even and especially in this time where there is so much to be terrified of.

Amen.