

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Grace to you and peace from the Risen One who is, who was, and who is to come.
Amen.

Usually when I read portions of scripture there seems to be a word, phrase, or verse that sticks out as being the center of the story. And in this morning's Gospel text we come across the words of Jesus: "do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid." This verse really doesn't need further explaining - it's as self-evident as they come! Similar to Jesus commanding us to love our neighbors. We get it - it makes sense just by reading it. But if all it took was understanding wouldn't the world already resemble the Kingdom of Heaven? If all it took was understanding, wouldn't we already see the end of economic disparities and the erasure of the boundaries and chasms that divide the People of God from each other and from our Creator? If all it took was understanding. But there is much more required of us. Understanding alone is not enough.

And that is why this commandment is so difficult. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let your hearts be afraid. This can be easily facilitated by our circumstances - just as it can be equally daunting.

Once, some time ago now, I was hiking high up in the mountains as the sun started to slip beneath the far distant horizon. The colors in the thin air were unspeakably

beautiful. The way the orange gave way to green and purple before turning into midnight blue were awe-inspiring. It seemed as though the sunset was completely surrounding me as I walked on the narrow path. My heart wasn't troubled in the least - nor was I afraid. The beauty all around me seemed to lift my spirit higher than the mountaintop I was hiking along.

But as the dark descended and I pulled out my flashlight I discovered the batteries were dead - and the backups I brought were AA instead of AAA. My heart sank, I became troubled, I started to fear. Here I was alone in the woods with my hiking partner who was much smaller than I am... We were in no place to fend off a predator. We couldn't see the path before us full of rocks, roots, inclines, declines, slippery mud, and branches ready to clothesline us if we didn't duck in time. The commandment that moments ago was so easy - do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid - became daunting.

Our circumstances can certainly determine whether or not this commandment is easy or difficult. In times of celebration our hearts may be light for there is no trouble in sight. There is only excitement and joy such as when we celebrate a newly baptized member of God's people. There is only excitement and hope when we welcome a new member into this community. There was only joy as I got to whip the kite around this sanctuary during the Easter Vigil and Easter Sunday services! In times of celebration, our hearts, I pray, are not troubled nor afraid but joyful.

But we live in a broken reality - one where celebration and joy does occasionally give way to stress, trouble, and yes, fear. It is when grief creeps into our beings that the commandment not to let our hearts be troubled becomes daunting. It is when our hopes of the future are unmet or shattered that the commandment not to let our hearts be afraid becomes very difficult.

Now if we were left to our own devices in both our celebrations and joy just as in our stress and trouble there would be little hope. But we are promised that the Advocate - God's Holy Spirit will come to us. We are promised that the Spirit of God will be relentless in searching for us. We are reminded the Holy Spirit lives within us.

When we turn to God's Holy Spirit living within our hearts, something amazing happens. Our hearts open. It's not complicated - it's not difficult to understand yet it can be difficult to live out.

Imagine life in the ancient world where Christians were being arrested, thrown into prison, and publically murdered. This is the setting where Lydia's heart was opened to hear of the Gospel - the message that would change her life. And because she believed, because she was convicted by the Holy Spirit living within her heart, she lived the message and the lives of her neighbors were changed.

Perhaps we do not need to imagine the hardship of Lydia's life because we live it ourselves. Dear people I know we hold within this community a multitude of stresses, burdens, and worries. It is in the midst of those things just as in the midst

of the celebrations that Christ's words ring true and faithful as they ever have. "The Holy Spirit... will remind you of all [Christ] has said to you."

In the midst of pain, anxiety, guilt, and shame the promise of Christ, the faithfulness of God, and the presence of the Holy Spirit is, has been, and will be with you. This is the good news for us today - that even in our broken reality, the Kingdom of Heaven breaks through.

Dear friends, the Kingdom of Heaven is not something that just happens to us, either. For we are called to be resilient and faithful disciples of this good news.

Remember Lydia who lived her faith so others might experience the Kingdom of Heaven breaking through in their lives. Her heart was opened by the same Holy Spirit that lives within your heart. May we take after Lydia's example and heed the words of Christ - not letting our hearts be troubled and refusing to be afraid - as we remember the Holy Spirit residing in our own hearts.

You have been called as you are - in your celebration, in your stress, in your joy, in your grief - to be undaunted for the same Spirit that lived within Lydia lives within you now. And for that I say thanks be to God. May we go from this place renewed by remembering the promise of Christ and the Spirit alive within us so we may be aware of the Kingdom of Heaven breaking into our lives. May we go from this place undaunted by the world so we might share the good news and allow the Kingdom of Heaven to break into the lives of all we meet.

You are called. Remember the Spirit alive within you. Amen.