

TIME AFTER PENTECOST: LECTIONARY 19 (PROPER 14) (C-RCL)
August 11, 2019

Genesis 15:1-6; Psalm 33:12-22; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12:32-40
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Ecumenical Prayer Cycle: Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger

“What is your greatest fear in this uncertain world?” This was a question I used for several semesters as part of an exercise with students in my First-Year Experience Seminar classes. Some of their fears were personal, others relational, still others global. Bees, bugs, and spiders were the things that several students feared. Two students had a fear of heights. A significant number of the students listed “failure” as their greatest fear. For some, this fear revolved around disappointing someone they loved or losing that person. For others, their greatest fear was loneliness, being alone, or dying – or dying without making a difference in the world. Other fears included “being fat,” “being in debt,” “getting raped or attacked,” “growing old,” and “collapse of the economy; [and the rise of a] dictatorship.” One student listed “massive World War with all countries.” Another student, in the spring of 2012, said, “My greatest fear would be that the people in powerful positions would become too far away from the majority of regular people, and then the problems of the world would only get worse.”

I imagine that some of us today have fears similar to those my students named; for example, we, too, may fear death – or spiders. Or we could come up with our own list of fears in this uncertain world. We may fear a diagnosis of cancer or of Alzheimer’s. We may fear powerlessness in the face of hate groups. We may fear identity theft or Internet hacking. We may

fear losing control of our lives – or that the world is already out of control.

We may fear what our leaders will do – or what they will fail to do. We may fear for the very life of this planet.

In her 2018 book, *The Monarchy of Fear: A Philosopher Looks at Our Political Crisis*, Martha C. Nussbaum acknowledges that the fears of many Americans have a basis in real problems, and that these problems are deep and difficult to solve. But she cautions us that panic on both the left and the right can exaggerate our dangers, making the time even “more dangerous than it would otherwise be” and even “more likely to lead to genuine disasters.” [Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Monarchy of Fear: A Philosopher Looks at Our Political Crisis* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2018), pp. 1, 2, & 3] Her point has been sharply driven home recently by yet more mass shootings, some inspired by the fear and panic spread by *8Chan*, an Internet home used by conspiracists and white nationalists that, finally, was shut down just a few days ago.

“Do not be afraid,” the LORD said to Abram. Or, as the Revised Standard Version puts it, “Fear not.” “Fear not. I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” [Genesis 15:1] The imperative “Fear not” in biblical text is often a prelude to a momentous event or announcement. In this story, Abram is concerned about who will be his heir, so he may be thinking of his death. Abram remains childless. Without offspring, he sees only a bleak future. But the LORD brings Abram outside and tells him to look toward the heavens. I don’t know what phase the moon was in that night, but I like to think it was shining there, too. “Count the stars,” God says. “Count the

stars – if you are *able* to count them. For that’s how many descendants you will have!” And just imagine how many stars Abram could see unhampered by our modern-day light pollution! And, Abram believes God and trusts the promise. But the promise is not fulfilled immediately – not at all! I wonder how many times in the fourteen or so years between Abram’s vision and the birth of his son Isaac he goes outside, and, after looking at the heavens, hears again God’s imperative, “Fear not!”, and begins to hope again. Abram’s story reminds us that faith-filled trusting in the promises of God – even when God has said, “Fear not!” – can require an active patience and persistence that may be challenging.

We hear this imperative in the Gospel, too: “Fear not,” says Jesus. “Do not be afraid, little flock.” The active patience and persistence Jesus speaks to are about readiness, about being prepared. Part of this readiness and being prepared have to do with investing our hearts in people and things that truly matter – and living fully into God’s reign. Instead of facing life with fear, we who have experienced God’s generosity are called to be “ready to receive from God and to give to others.” [“Sunday, August 11, 2019, Lectionary 19, Year C,” intro to “Gospel: Luke 12:32-40,” *SundaysandSeasons.com* <https://members.sundaysandseasons.com/Home/TextsAndResources#texts>, accessed 8.6.2019]

“Sell your possessions, and give alms,” Jesus says. [Luke 12:33] This might seem like a scary thing to do! But as one commentator challenges us: “Almsgiving is an expression of true solidarity with others. This is a solidarity that refuses to ... let inequalities stand Almsgiving isn’t about offerings that *help* those with less money; it must be about sharing power and

advantage. Such transformative solidarity creates ‘unfailing treasure in heaven’ (cf. 18:22).” [Matt Skinner, “Commentary on Luke 12:32-40”,

https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4142, accessed 8.6.2019]

This “sharing power and advantage” may be frightening to those *with* power and advantage. I am reminded here of the reversals that Mary speaks of in the Magnificat early in Luke’s Gospel: “God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, / and lifted up the lowly; / God has filled the hungry with good things, / and sent the rich away empty.” [Luke 1:52-53]

Another example of reversal comes in the first parable Jesus tells in today’s reading – when the master invites the slaves to sit down and then serves them. These slaves have girded their loins – that is, they have tied the lower parts of their robes around their waist so they are freed to run; they are ready for action – even though they do not know if the master will come “in the middle of the night, or near dawn.” [Luke 12:35] They have kept their lamps lit. That would have been a lot of work in the time of Jesus – what with multiple lamps needing oil replenished and wicks adjusted! Justo González in *Luke* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010, pp. 163-164, as noted in Matt Skinner, “Commentary on Luke 12:32-40,”

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary-id-4142>, accessed 8.6.2019]

We might remember the work involved in such lamp-tending during the offering this morning when the choir will be singing a setting of the spiritual, “Keep Your Lamps!” (Though it isn’t certain, this spiritual with its call to “keep your lamps trimmed and burning” may have been a code song for another kind of readiness – keeping on the lookout for a conductor on the

underground railroad.)

In the final section of today's Gospel, Jesus continues teaching about being ready and being alert – for the coming of the Son-of-Man. And the image used is that of a thief breaking and entering – not a very comforting image but rather a fairly frightening one! Nowadays, we try to be prepared against thieves. We install burglar alarms, security cameras, timer lights. We lock our doors and guard our passwords. Still, thieves do break in and steal – and we (rightly) feel violated. My sister's apartment was broken into. My high school award sweater was taken from a grad school locker, and my car stolen from a lot near my office. Just this past week our "Hate Has No Home Here" sign was taken from our yard.

But, here's a question for you to ponder – what if in the case of the Gospel it is *Jesus* who is the thief? (Does this mean we are to *fear* Jesus' coming at an unexpected hour?)

That Jesus is a thief is the point Nadia Bolz-Weber makes in her book *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People*. In a chapter entitled "A Thief in the Night," she says:

... If the guy knew when the thief was coming he wouldn't have gotten his stuff stolen. So be ready because it's unexpected.

But how the heck can you be ready for something you don't know is coming? How can we be ready for the unexpected? Well, we can't.

Here's the thing [she says]: like the house owner, knowing

what to look for as a way of avoiding being robbed is only advantageous if we assume being robbed is a bad thing. . . . Maybe it's good news that *Jesus* has been staking the joint and there will be a break-in. . . . There was and is and will be a break-in because God is not interested in our loss-prevention programs but in saving us from ourselves ... and saving us even from our certainties about God's story itself.

[She continues:] This holy thief *wants* to steal from us, and maybe that is literal and metaphoric at the same time. Perhaps ... the idea that *Jesus* wants to break in and jack some of our stuff is really good news. There's just a whole lot of crap in my house – again, both literally and metaphorically – that I could well do without.

[She concludes:] That's how God works sometimes. Not through the things we are prepared for but through the things we don't expect. [Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People*, New York, NY: Convergent Books, © 2015 by Nadia Bolz-Weber, pp. 58-59, emphasis on "Jesus" added]

"Fear not," God said to Abram. But you know what? There *are* days when there is much to fear – when the news is dire, with one more hate crime; one more racist, xenophobic, heterosexist, ageist, and/or ableist statement; one more war casualty; one more young black male shooting; one more sign of global warming; one more child dying in detention; one more family ripped apart; one more data breach; one more failed treaty – I mean, the list goes on –.

But you know what else? There are evenings when I leave my office, step across the parking lot, and take a moment to look up at the sky – to see

the stars and the moon – and it is at moments like this when the words of the first stanza of today’s Hymn of the Day come to me and reassure me: “Our God, to Whom We Turn / When weary with illusion,/ Whose stars serenely burn / Above this earth’s confusion, / Thine is the mighty plan, / The steadfast order sure, / In which the world began, / Endures, and shall endure.” [SBH, 171, text: Edward Grubb] This doesn’t change everything else that is going on around me in that moment in the world, but it does help me put things in perspective. Even if there is much to fear on this earth, I am reminded by this glimpse of the heavens that there is something much bigger, much larger, much more expansive than I. Fears are there, yes, but so are things that bring hope.

My daughter Kerstin felt this “power of the moon” as a camp counselor for some years at Camp Calumet. She reflects:

[N]earing the end of each two-week residence camp session at Calumet, I would face eight teary-eyed 14-year-old girls facing the prospect of leaving behind new friendships and going back to reality, a reality with many unknowns. To make it better? I would bring everyone out for special devos in a large field, in the clearing of trees by the road into town. While sitting on blankets in a circle, we’d go around sharing the most magical things about the past 2 weeks. Then I’d say, “You know what? The experiences lived and people met during the past two weeks will be no less real away from Lake Ossipee. In fact, whenever you miss these people, these experiences, these feelings of innocence, of joy, of happiness, whenever you need a little hug, you just need to look up at that big shining moon and think about right now. Think about this moment and these women and God and Jesus and love and hope. Do not let fear rule; rather, my friends, [let] hope.”

Our Second Reading from Hebrews opens with the words: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” In response to this text, Kerstin shared this story:

The second I read these words, I thought of a song by A Bunch of Guys. It was a favorite Calumet tune, “Now Faith,” that is based on this Hebrews text. It is a powerful reminder of God’s love for many a camper who has spent summers at Calumet. It’s often sung at night, a slower-tempo song that isn’t as much about “go go go Jesus” as some of the “Rah rah ray” morning song selections. It’s sung on the shores of Lake Ossipee, which, if the weather is just right, the moon reflects onto in all of its splendor. The song is a powerful reminder that in our faith journey – what can be at times a fearful journey – we must, as the song says, “hang on, believe, and don’t lose heart, for my God is here with me, my God is here with me.”

Hope, says Martha Nussbaum – “[H]ope is the opposite or flip side of fear. Both react to uncertainty, but in opposing ways. Their action tendencies are for that reason very different. Hope expands and surges forward, fear shrinks back. Hope is vulnerable, fear self-protective.” [Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Monarchy of Fear: A Philosopher Looks at Our Political Crisis* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2018), p. 211]

Maybe hope looks like the more than 700 members of the ELCA Churchwide Assembly – and allies – who this past Wednesday joined “in a march and prayer vigil to the Milwaukee Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) office. The march addressed concerns about the human rights of migrant children and families entering the U.S. along the southern border.” [<https://www.elca.org/News-and-Events/8000>, accessed 8.9.2019]

And maybe hope is 11-year-old Ruben Martinez's #ElPasoChallenge which challenges "everyone to do 22 acts of good deeds in honor of the 22 people who were killed" in El Paso. [https://abcnews.go.com/GMA/Living/11-year-el-paso-boy-creates-elpasochallenge-calling/story?id=64799799&cid=clicksource_4380645_null_headlines_hed, accessed 8.9.2019]

And we could add to the challenge – to do acts of good deeds in honor of the people killed in Dayton. Perhaps hope is a hug from a friend or being part of a community.

But now, back to my First-Year Experience Seminar classes and the "greatest fear" exercise: Part Two of the exercise was to work in small groups: Each group was provided with sheets of aluminum foil. Each group was to select one of the student responses to the question about fear and, using the aluminum foil, design something to illustrate that fear. Having done that, they were to use more aluminum foil to design something to illustrate how that fear could be faced, met, taken on, or overcome. Some designs were particularly touching. For example, a foil heart was designed to meet the fear of loneliness. But to meet the fear of spiders, the foil spider was taken and simply smashed flat! Not all of our fears are so easily dealt with – if I could only smash flat my fear of the effects of global warming, or my fear of white supremacist groups!

What if each of us were to make a modern interpretation of one of our fears – say, out of foil? Instead of just smashing it (like what the students did with the spider), what if we looked into it and faced it head on? Looking at it head on while claiming lyrics from the Bunch of Guys' song: "Lift up your

tired hands. / Because of the cross this battle will be won / Our faith cannot be lost / For my God is here with me / My God is here with me." ["Now Faith," A Bunch of Guys, *Take a Breath* CD, © 2003 wonderwhy]

"Fear not," God says to Abram – and to us. "I am your shield." [Genesis 15:1] "Fear not," Jesus says to the disciples – and to us. "It is God's delight to give the dominion to you." [Luke 12:32] Later, at the end of Luke's Gospel the resurrected Jesus says to the disciples – and to us, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself." [Luke 24:38, NRSV]

During our Communion liturgy we sing, "Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again." And Christ *does* come – again and again. At each Eucharist Christ comes to us and says, "Do not be afraid. Fear not. See, it is I myself. Take and eat."

Amen.