

LECTIONARY 33 [Proper 28] (C-RCL) – November 13, 2022

Malachi 4:1-2a; Isaiah 12:2-6; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19

University Lutheran Church, Cambridge, MA – Imogene A. Stulken

Two hundred ninety-nine years ago, on November 7, 1723, the cantata BWV 60, *O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort* – “O Eternity, you Thunderous Word” – was first performed. Sixteen hours ago – more or less – at St Johns Lutheran Church Southgate in Melbourne, Australia, the cantata was again performed – this time as part of St Johns’ ongoing Bach cantata series. The organist for the Sunday service and the director of the cantata was UniLu alum, Graham Lieschke. Immediately preceding the offering of the cantata, was the sermon, delivered by a guest preacher via pre-recorded video. How do I know that? I know that because I was that guest preacher!

We won’t hear the cantata at UniLu today. However, I’d like to reflect here on the cantata *text* along with that of this morning’s Gospel reading. As a way into that, I will lift up four phrases selected from today’s Psalm, namely:

“I will trust, and will not be afraid ...”

“... for the LORD GOD ... has become my salvation.”

“... make known the deeds of the LORD among the nations ...”

“Shout aloud and sing for joy ...” [Isaiah 12:2b, 2c-d, 4c, 6a]

Let us first consider the phrase from the Psalm: “I will trust, and will not be afraid ...”

What might you say if I were to ask you, “*What is your greatest fear in an uncertain world?*” This is the question I posed at a recent gathering of clergy colleagues. As it was near the end of October,

in anticipation of Reformation Sunday, we read these words from Psalm 46:

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;

though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult.” [Psalm 46:1-3, NRSV, emphasis added]

After reading the Psalm, I asked my colleagues the question, “What is your greatest fear in an uncertain world.” I don’t know how you might answer this question, but these pastors replied, “I have fears for my little world – for my congregation, for my family, but I also have fears related to the climate, poverty, fascism, Christian nationalism.” “Ditto that,” said others. “Anxieties are swirling around me.” Another voice added, “The political climate is making me especially fearful not only for my country, but for the world, for the children; it is an existential fear.”

In today’s Gospel, Jesus mentions wars, insurrections, great earthquakes, famines, plagues, arrests, persecutions, betrayal, hate – even death. All these – plus wildfires, floods, droughts, massacres, terrorist attacks, atrocities of various kinds, societal divisions – all these are real for the 21st century as well. And in the verses immediately following today’s reading, Jesus foretells the utter destruction of Jerusalem itself. In spite of all this, Jesus says, “***Do not be terrified.***” [Luke 21:9b, emphasis added]

Several times in Luke's Gospel we hear the words, "Do not be afraid," or, "Do not fear." In the very first chapter, when the angel Gabriel appears to Zechariah, Zechariah is overcome with fear, but the angel says, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John." [Luke 1:13] Later in chapter one, the angel Gabriel returns – this time to Mary: "Do not be afraid, Mary," says Gabriel, "for you have found favor with God." [Luke 1:30] And to the shepherds, filled with great fear at the night-time visit of the angels – to these shepherds the angel says, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people." [Luke 2:10] To Jairus, the father of the 12-year-old daughter, who is ill to the point of death – to him, Jesus says, "Do not fear. Only believe, and she will be saved." [Luke 8:50] Midway through the Gospel, Jesus says to the crowd, "I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that can do nothing more.... But even the hairs of your head are all counted. Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows." [Luke 12:4, 7] And to the disciples Jesus says, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." [Luke 12:32] Then in today's Gospel, Jesus says, "Do not be terrified." [Luke 21:9b] – But isn't that much more easily said than done??

Fear – specifically, the fear of impending personal death – is one of the topics in the cantata, *O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort* – "O Eternity, you Thunderous Word". A chorale of that name opens the cantata. Contemplating eternity – "the timeless tide", the "dark abyss of deathless pains" – leads the poet to exclaim: "My heart in fright can scarcely breathe" and "My soul is filled with

horror ... / No equal terror can be found." [*O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort*, Johann Rist (1607-1667); tr. "Australian Lutheran Hymn Book", 1926, rev. Graham Lieschke] Johann Rist, the hymn-writer of this text, had personal experience of death and the horrors of war. As a tutor to the sons of a Hamburg merchant, he accompanied them to the University of Rostock, where he also studied – Hebrew, mathematics, and medicine. But during his time at Rostock, the Thirty Years War nearly emptied the University, and "Johann Rist himself lay there for several weeks, suffering from pestilence." [<https://www.bach-cantatas.com/Lib/Rist.htm>]

It might be helpful to note that by the time the Gospel of Luke was put into written form, the Temple had already been razed to the ground by the Romans – maybe for as many as 30 years. The center of Jewish life was reduced to rubble – except for part of the retaining wall – which is still standing, and which today is known as the Wailing Wall. Still, Jesus says, "Do not be terrified."

If we continue reading in Luke chapter 21, we find the words that we heard way back in Advent of last year: Jesus speaks of signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and distress among the nations on earth, and of people "fainting from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world". [Luke 21:26a] "Then", says Jesus, "they will see 'the Son-of-Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." [Luke 21:27-28]

This text loops us back to the early days of Jesus' life when Mary and Joseph present the young child at the temple. There they are

met by the prophet Anna, who speaks about the child “to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.” [Luke 2:38]

Are we able today to hear Jesus say to *us*, “Do not be terrified”??
How are we to hear that word? And *where*?

I turn now to the second phrase from the Psalm: “... for the LORD GOD ... has become my salvation.” So the fear of death is one theme in the cantata under consideration, but it isn’t the only one, and it doesn’t have the last word. The other major theme is *hope* – specifically, the hope of salvation.

Hope – what might you say if I were to ask you, “What signs of hope do you notice?” Again, I don’t know how you might answer this question, but when I asked my clergy colleagues, “What signs of hope do you notice?” *they* replied, “In the perspectives of the very old and the very young”; and, “In the places where I witnessed people being kind to each other; in small courtesies – being human is to be connected.” Another said, “I see hope in strange places – in the leaves changing, dying, falling – yet they are gorgeous at the same time. There’s the hope of spring eventually. Resurrection is everywhere; every day is an opportunity for new life.” And to that another added, “Hope is the promise we hold onto; death is a part of life, but Jesus goes beyond that.”

In the cantata, to every statement that Fear (sung by the alto) raises, Hope (sung by the tenor) responds with words of comfort and assurance. For example, when Fear exclaims about the “difficult way to the final battle and struggle”, Hope readily

responds, “My Protector is already there, my Saviour indeed stands with me with comfort by my side.” When Fear worries about “the great guilt of my sins”, Hope is there, saying that God “will impose no death sentence for these.” When Fear laments the weakness of faith, Hope asserts, “[M]y Jesus carries my burden with me.” When Fear cries, “The open grave appears horrifying”, Hope replies, “It will be only a house of peace for me.” [Translation of cantata text based on that of Pamela Dellal (Emmanuel Music), included in St Johns Lutheran Church bulletin with permission.
<https://www.emmanuelmusic.org/bach-translations/bwv-60>]

But Fear is still fearful, noting that “death remains hateful to human nature”, that death is still terrifying, that the body “will become dust and earth again”. But now, cutting through these fears is nothing less than the voice of Christ, in the words from Revelation: “Blessed are the dead ...”; “Blessed are the dead, who die in the Lord ...”; “Blessed are the dead, who die in the Lord from henceforth.”

As we noted earlier, several times in Luke’s Gospel we hear the words, “Do not be afraid,” or, “Do not fear.” There is one place, however, where we might *expect* to hear those words, but we *don’t*, and that is at the end of Luke’s Gospel. The faithful women are at the tomb where Jesus had been placed when, suddenly, heavenly messengers appear right beside them. The women are *terrified!* Here, the angelic messengers do *not* relieve the women’s terror by saying, “Do not be afraid”. No, instead, the women are given the news, “Jesus is not here, but has risen.”

This, then, is our hope – the Easter promise of resurrection.

In the introductory words to the funeral liturgy in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, we read:

At the funeral we give voice to sorrow, thank God for our loved one, and entrust this companion of ours into the [care] of God. Trusting in God's promise in baptism that we are claimed by Christ forever, we rest in the sure hope of the resurrection. When the church gathers to mark the end of life, Christ crucified and risen is the witness of worship, the strength of mutual consolation, and the hope of healing. [*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, © 2006 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, published by Augsburg Fortress, p. 279]

This bring us to the third phrase from the Psalm: "... make known the deeds of the LORD among the nations ..." The word "witness" in the preceding paragraph reminds me of the word "testify" in the last paragraph of today's Gospel text. Jesus says that before all the wars, insurrections, great earthquakes, famines, plagues, arrests, persecutions, betrayal, hate – even deaths – occur, the disciples would be arrested and persecuted and brought before rulers and governors – *but that this would give them the opportunity to testify!*

When thinking of this, I find helpful the words of Roberta Bondi, author and professor emerita of church history:

[Roberta Bondi writes:] This is tough – no kidding. Before the end comes, I am going to testify to the truth of the gospel that because each person is of infinite value to God, no one ought to withhold from anybody what they need for life. That wealth is not God's reward to the righteous or poverty God's punishment.

That God's most particular concern is for the helpless, the poor and struggling, the hopeless and the outcast. That getting revenge on the personal or national level is wrong. And I should expect a lot of trouble for speaking out.

[She continues:] Witness, how? Considering the enormity of the world's problems, all the injustice, callousness and greed and the suffering and pain that follow them, I am tempted to lie down and not get up again. How can I testify to the gospel in a massively afflicted world when I am only one person, and an insignificant one at that?

[After reflecting some more, she adds:] I must remember ... it is individuals, single children, men and women, who are hungry, sick, out of work or without limbs from bombs that fell on their houses. It is these folks, not abstract categories, that need my witness.

<https://www.religion-online.org/article/one-plot-at-a-time-luke-25-19/>

When I discussed today's texts with my Roman Catholic colleague, Deacon Michael Mott, he noted that: "Today's gospel invites us to envision our end, either at the end of our lives or at the end of the world – whichever comes first." Mike then imagined Christ asking us questions: "How have you used the gifts I have given you? In what ways have you lived and shared my Gospel message? Whose life is enriched because you chose to care for them. Tell me about the difficult people in your life that you made an honest effort to love." [Michael Mott, sermon preached on Thirty Third Sunday, OT, Year B, St. Cecilia]

Perhaps some of us here today have had our personal lives shattered – something that had been beautiful or something that we could count on is suddenly gone. A cancer diagnosis, a death of a young person, the loss of necessary income, a broken bone and loss of mobility after a fall, a rupture in family relations. So that members of the community do not have to bear these burdens and challenges alone, how do we support each other during such times? How do we, together – and in the company of ancestors like Anna – how do we – together – wait – and wait actively – for resurrection and healing? [See Richard Swanson, “Twenty-Sixth Sunday after Pentecost: Commentary on Luke 21:5-19, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-33-3/commentary-on-luke-215-19-3>]

So how are we the hope for others? And how do we witness to that hope? I few weeks ago I was asked to prepare a funeral service for a 16-year-old who had died suddenly at home. Perhaps I offered hope to the bereaved parents through sharing information on The Compassionate Friends, a support group for those who have lost children – of any age. Perhaps I offer hope to the students on campus by sitting with them, listening nonjudgmentally to them, and believing their stories – as they sift through experiences, search for clarity, gain another perspective. Perhaps you witness to hope by engaging in advocacy work. Perhaps it is in fostering a child – or in fostering a dog or a cat. Perhaps it is in supporting the efforts of refugee resettlement. Perhaps it is in sending cards to those who are ill or lonely.

And now, briefly, the fourth phrase from the Psalm: “Shout aloud and sing for joy ...” Perhaps we offer hope to others – and to ourselves – when we make music together – whether that be

the music of lament or rejoicing. We may find it more difficult to sing when we are in pain or in despair – when *nothing* seems to be working and *everything* is going wrong. But what about singing *through* despair, pain, or discomfort *to* joy? We may not get there by ourselves; we may need others to join us. In a sense, this is what happens near the end of the cantata: After the voice of Christ speaks to Fear, Fear responds: “Very well! / Since from now on I shall be blessed, / come back, o Hope, once more! / My body without fear may rest in sleep, / my spirit can already glimpse that joy.” [English translation by Francis Browne (November 2005; revised September 2012) <https://bach-cantatas.com/Texts/BWV60-Eng3.htm>]

There is much to fear in this world, yes. Yet, the author of 1 John tells us: “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear ...” [1 John 4:18]

In today’s Hymn of the Day, we will join in singing: “O Love that triumphs over loss, / we bring our hearts before your cross; / come, finish your salvation.” [“Lord Christ, When First You Came to Earth”, stanza 4e, f, g, W. Russell Bowie, (1882 – 1969)]

So, not only: What is your greatest fear in this uncertain world? But also: What signs of hope do you notice? How do you witness to the love of God in your life? And where do you find moments to sing for joy?

In the words of the Psalm, then, let us be bold to say:

“I will trust, and will not be afraid ...”

“... for the LORD GOD ... has become my salvation.”

“... make known the deeds of the LORD among the nations ...”

“Shout aloud and sing for joy ...” [Isaiah 12:2b, 2c-d, 4c, 6a]

And may it be so!