

Sermon † August 7, 2022
Genesis 15:1-6 & Luke 12:32-40
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I've got this "thing" about bats . . . the thing is . . . I don't like them. And if I think about it, I have no reason to fear bats. I guess along the way I've bought into all of the folklore surrounding bats. So, over the years, I have made it a point to read articles about them. For one thing, bats do not get caught in your hair. And very seldom do bats contract rabies. They really want very little to do with humans. But they do like mosquitoes and devour hundreds of them a night. So, as many articles on bats remind us, *"Bats are our friends"*. But as for me, I still don't like bats. They're icky and I am afraid of them.

Maybe if I'd have more faith, I could get over this fear of bats. Did you happen to notice how both the first lesson and the Gospel begin with the divine command, *"Do not be afraid"*? And then in the 12th chapter of Luke's gospel, Jesus says to the disciples, *"Do not be afraid little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."* In a similar vein in Genesis 15 we hear God saying to Abraham, *"Do not be afraid . . . I am your shield; your reward shall be very great."* All of the *"do not be afraid"* talk may be great for God, unfortunately our human fears are not so easily removed. In fact, our fears can even hinder our faith and trust in God.

Take Abraham, for example. Generally, scripture portrays Abraham as a model for faith and trust in God. However, Abraham is also human and we discover in today's lesson that there were times when fear was more prominent than faith in Abraham's walk with God.

As we encounter Abraham in Genesis 15 we need to remember this is not the first occasion God has called Abraham to trust.

Remember when God said to Abraham: *"Take Sarah, your spouse, take your possessions, and leave your homeland. Go to the land that I am going to show you."* Then God made some magnificent promises:

† *"I will bless you, I will make your name great."*

† *"I will make for you a great nation, From your descendants, I will bless all the nations of the world."*

So Abraham did as God asked. And God delivered on God's promise . . . and the land was good. But then Abraham was, again, afraid.

This new land was great . . . but what about the second part of the promise . . . the part about descendants. Abraham is pushing ninety and Sarah is on the downhill side of seventy . . . and they have no children.

Abraham is afraid that God will be unable to keep the promise. After all, Abraham only has a slave. Because his circumstances seem so bleak, Abraham can only respond to God in fear.

So God shifts Abraham's focus. To look not at how he defines reality but at God's reality and God's promises.

God: *“Step outside for a moment . . . do you see all those stars?”*

Abraham: *“We'll sure.”*

God: *“There are so many that you cannot even count them. So shall all your descendants be.”*

In and of themselves the stars proved nothing . . . Abraham had seen them before. But God uses them as a sign . . . a focal point. God is showing Abraham that he can trust God . . . that God has the power to bring into being that which God has promised.

The stars are a *sign* that God is there continuously for Abraham, protecting and caring for him like a shield. When Abraham stops looking at his definition of reality, *which is scaring him*, and starts looking at God's promised reality, then he lets go of his fear.

Today's gospel lesson from Luke is kind of the same but different. Jesus pinpoints a couple of aspects of human existence that really cause us to be afraid: money and possessions.

It is no accident that right after he says, *“Do not be afraid little flock”* he continues, *“Sell all your possessions and give alms (i.e., give your money to the poor.)”*

It is rather amazing that two thousand years before laptops, video games, smart phones, lake cottages, and designer jeans, Jesus knows that our possessions can possess us. We can become so caught up in the stuff we accumulate in life that we become afraid to live life. When this happens, our financial fears start to choke off our faithful discipleship.

And Jesus knows that we have this nasty habit of seeing money and possessions as the keys to the good life, secure life . . . that is why Jesus' words here are so pertinent . . . so powerful.

Now, Jesus is not saying, *“Hey, don't worry, God is going to foot the whole bill.”* Rather, he is telling us that we do not have to be afraid that we will miss getting it all, because the *all* we truly need has already been given to us.

Fear is not our friend. Fear closes up our lives so that we look after only our wants and needs. Fear tells us to get all we can right here and now but then makes us even more afraid we might lose what we have struggled to accumulate.

To this anxiety-driven merry-go-round Jesus says, *“Do not be afraid.”*

When we stop defining reality by what we can buy or sell, amazing things can happen.
We start to see that our lives and our families are cherished gifts to be enjoyed.

When we do not have to worry about losing, then we are able to open our own lives to what Abraham's descendants were meant to do, namely, to use our possessions as a blessing from God for those in need.

In doing so, we won't lose what we truly need.

We are not called to live timid, closed-in, fearful lives. Instead, Jesus is calling us to live open lives precisely because God has opened the Kingdom to us.

Do not be afraid, little flock, for God's delight is our inclusion in the kingdom today, tomorrow, and unto eternity.

Amen.