

Fear Not!

Luke 12:22-40

Also Isaiah 1:1, 10-20; Psalm 50:1-8, 22-23; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Grant us, O Lord God, the knowledge of your divine words, and fill us with the understanding of your holy Gospel and the riches of your divine gifts and the indwelling of your Holy Spirit. Enable us with joy to keep your holy commandments and accomplish them and fulfill your will, and to be accounted worthy of the blessings and the mercies that are from you now and at all times.

Syrian Jacobite Liturgy

Are You Afraid?

Are you afraid? Not now; I hope you are not afraid of what I might say. But are there things in life that frighten you? I am afraid of heights. Perhaps some of you have similar fears. I am afraid every Friday morning before my clarinet lesson. Are you children afraid before a lesson or a test? This world is a frightening place, and anyone who denies it is not paying attention. Last month a millionaire businessman in Ukraine was killed in his own home when a Russian missile hit. Here was a man who was not in battle, home minding his own business, far from the war – a man wealthy enough to buy security – and he was killed by a missile. It is very unlikely that you will be hit by a missile, but there are dangerous drivers on the roads. And then our relationships. Who doesn't worry about their children? And some of us might be afraid that our spouse will do something stupid and put us all at risk. Yes, this world is a dangerous place. And if you are not afraid, you must not be thinking clearly.

Do you think I am being gloomy? "Is this any way to begin a sermon?" some of you are wondering. "I come to church for encouragement, not to be reminded of my troubles." Jesus knows this world is a frightening place, and He is not afraid to talk about it. Jesus knew that it was hard for his audience to get a good meal every day, and clothing was expensive. These particular concerns are not the worries of most of us here today, but they are representative of the daily concerns of people in every time and place. Jesus is not being gloomy or discouraging. Jesus is acknowledging your condition. True, you come to church for encouragement, but you bring with you all the troubles of life. These are real, and they will not disappear or be solved by ignoring them. You are struggling to navigate these problems as you make your way through life, and Jesus is here to help.

Addressing Our Fears

Jesus began to address our fears by saying, "Do not be anxious..." Right away some people will think, "Oh, good. Jesus is going to get us through this." Others will think, "Are you kidding? Don't you know what we're facing?" Jesus immediately continued by demonstrating that He indeed knows what we're facing. He acknowledged the daily worries of those in the crowd. Then He said that "life is more than food..." The things that worry us are real and not to be dismissed, but there are much higher priorities. Jesus will return to this in a bit, but first He shows us in tangible ways why we should not be anxious, even about these lesser priorities. Look around you, you who are so worried about the things of this world. We share this city with all sorts of creatures: rabbits and squirrels, foxes and skunks, various birds, etc. Allentown is not littered with dead animals. Where do these creatures get their food? How do they find shelter from predators? Isn't it obvious that God is taking care of these creatures? Have you noticed that the gladioluses are blooming? How do you think that happened? God provided all they need to produce glorious flowers. Jesus says, if God never neglects the plants and animals, but provides for all their needs, don't you think He will provide for all *your* needs? Of course He will! We really can relax. I read somewhere that worry is bringing tomorrow's challenges into today. Jesus said elsewhere that today's challenges are sufficient for today. We can relax, but that does not mean do nothing. It means we can go about our daily tasks cheerfully and without anxiety because we know God will take care of what we truly need.

Jesus says it is foolish, and a foolish waste of time and energy to worry about our daily needs. Gas prices are skyrocketing and the stock market is tanking. Relax. Jesus will make sure your needs are met. Perhaps you will need to vacation closer to home this year, but it will be OK. Instead, what should really interest us is Jesus' Kingdom. Jesus' purpose in coming to earth was to establish His Kingdom. Luke has been demonstrating this from the beginning. Jesus came preaching the gospel, the good news of the Kingdom. Jesus' miracles were setting people free from enslavement to the kingdom of this world. Jesus' call to His disciples was to join Him in establishing His Kingdom. What is really important and exciting about life is the opportunity to work with Jesus in building His Kingdom. Jesus is saying, "Come on folks! I'm taking care of all your earthly needs. Let's do the fun, important work of the Kingdom together!"

Entering the Kingdom

"Work? I thought you said Jesus wants us to relax. And we've heard many times that salvation is by grace apart from works. And David, you have reminded us many times that there is no condemnation in Christ Jesus. Now are you saying we have to work for our salvation? And will God condemn us if we don't?"

Notice that Jesus is not addressing the crowds here. Verse 22 specifies that Jesus is addressing His disciples. These were men who were busy fishing and tax collecting and pursuing the affairs of life. Jesus sought them, called them, and made them part of His company. This is salvation by grace. They did not volunteer to serve Jesus. It was not their idea that they needed Jesus. Jesus took the initiative to go find them and bring them into His Kingdom. This is how salvation works for all people. All people are caught up with the interests of this world, and Jesus goes looking for those He has chosen. Jesus calls them to follow, gives them faith to trust Him, and welcomes them into His Kingdom. This is salvation by grace, and this is your story if you are a Christian. You were not born an innocent baby. You were born with the sin of Adam woven into your nature. You had no interest in Jesus, but Jesus came looking for you. Jesus gave you parents and friends, preachers and teachers to introduce you to Jesus. Jesus preached the gospel and gave you faith to believe in Him. Now you are with millions of other Christians in Jesus' Kingdom.

Fear Not!

Does this sound too good to be true? What's the catch? Where is the point where we learn how much we have to do to enter Jesus' Kingdom? What is Jesus *really* after? Well, *of course* the gospel is too good to be true. The gospel is *always* too good to be true, which is one reason so many people scoff at it. But the truth is, the gospel *is* true! Elsewhere the scripture tells us the reason for the gospel: God loves us. The reason Jesus came into the world in the first place and the reason Jesus seeks people today is because He loves them. Jesus gives us faith and new mind and a new heart because our old heart and mind were killing us. Jesus loves us and wants us to have eternal life. And Jesus want us to be with Him. That's what eternal life is – life in the Father and the Son. Are you afraid that this might be true of some people, but not for you? Or that Jesus might help you a little, but that you are such a mess that He would never want you in His Kingdom? So Jesus concludes this paragraph by saying, "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

Fear not! This good news is for you! You will not be given the scapings of the Kingdom banquet. You are part of the Kingdom! You get a seat at the table with Jesus. Jesus calls His followers a little flock. We are not some random by-standers. We are God's sheep and Jesus is our Good Shepherd, which calls up the image of God's provision and protection revealed in the 23rd psalm. All the blessings and privileges of God's Kingdom are ours. Jesus began this teaching by encouraging His followers that there was no need for anxiety about daily needs or the future. He ends this paragraph by urging us to abandon our fears. Not only are our daily needs covered, but we are part of a divine Kingdom!

Possessing the Kingdom

But wait. Jesus does not say we will *enter* His Father's Kingdom. What He says is greater – *far* greater. Jesus says God *gives* us His Kingdom. God gives His Kingdom to the followers of Jesus. Christians do not just enter God's Kingdom; they own it. Now what could that mean?

Jesus does not explain how we own the Kingdom. The apostles unpack that in their letters. The central idea is that Christians are united to Jesus who inherits the Kingdom as the firstborn Son. Joined to Jesus, all that is true of Him is true of us as well. But here Jesus addresses the *implications* of possessing the Kingdom.

Ruth and I own a house. It is nothing lavish, but it is nice for us and we like it. Our house serves us very well. There is room on the third floor for my office, room on the first floor for office space for Ruth, and room outside for a garden. Since I own our house, I have the privilege of doing what I wish with it. We wanted a first-floor bathroom, so we turned a closet into a bathroom. I can open all the windows and doors to let the breeze blow through. I can make coffee all day without anyone complaining about the cost of electricity, and I can water the garden without worrying that someone might mind. I enjoy sitting on the porch and reading in the evening. We have a comfortable life in the house we own. But owning a house also carries responsibilities. The front yard began to look ragged, so someone had to work on it. No one was going to landscape it and plant a variety of shade flowers there except the owner. One morning when Benjamin was with us over Christmas he came dashing upstairs to announce there was a water leak in the basement. Benjamin did not fix it. That was the responsibility of the owner. So I patched the leak until Jason could come repair it. And this month a hefty tax bill is due, and guess who has to pay it?

We own the Kingdom. We get the astonishing benefits of this Kingdom, one of which is eternal life – but we also have responsibilities. Take the needy, for example. Who is going to take care of those who do not have enough food to eat, or clothing to wear? What about those who are sick and need help? How will children and elderly be cared for? Who will comfort the bereaved and encourage the lonely? So immediately after Jesus tells us that God is giving us the Kingdom, He tells us to sell our possessions and give to the needy. He mentions financial need, but this is another representation for all sorts of needs. You can see an ethical principle at work here. Jesus will meet our basic needs, so we are called to meet the basic needs of others. And since Jesus meets our basic needs, we have the resources to help others. But Jesus did not come to teach ethics. Jesus came to establish a Kingdom. But Jesus' Kingdom is not like any you have known. The kingdoms of this world are founded to serve the powerful and operate by force and fear. Jesus' Kingdom is founded to serve the weak, and it rejects force and fear.

The Fearless Kingdom

If you want something, the standard way to get it is through force or fear. Vladimir Putin wants Ukraine, and he intends to take it by force. China wants Taiwan, and is trying to take it by injecting fear into Taiwan and her allies. There is no fear in Jesus' Kingdom because it does not operate by force. Jesus will not force His followers to act responsibly, so we have nothing to fear. We can run recklessly through the house doing whatever we want and Jesus is not going to smack us down. But reality will. If the householder does not fix the plumbing, soon he will have no water. If he does not secure the property, thieves will steal his goods. If the householder does not give attention to the grounds, the once-pleasant property will become dismally ugly. Jesus loves us and will always love us, and Jesus will not whip us into shape. Jesus *does* urge us to act responsibly. That is consistent with our new status as Kingdom owners and will make our Kingdom a pleasant place. And free from fear, we can take on responsibilities without fear of failure. Jesus' Kingdom is one in which its members can try all sorts of things and have a glorious time in the process. Some projects might succeed, and others might not. In hindsight some projects might appear a bit immature, but we can learn from those and move on. We might attempt something and discover we do not have the gifts or resources to do them. Noted. Then we try something else. And as we go, God will use us to build His

Kingdom on earth, particularly to care for the needy. But God will not punish us for trying, even if the results are unsatisfying.

Brothers and sisters, our salvation is far more glorious than we ordinarily imagine. God has done far, far more for us than pay for our sins – as monumental as that is. Jesus has called us to work with Him in His Kingdom. Think of it! We get to work side-by-side with Jesus! Jesus and you together build a family, rear children, teach school, design bridges, build houses, preach the gospel, and save the lost. We can do nothing apart from Jesus, but Jesus has chosen to do His work in this world with us. Jesus and we are partners in saving the lost and building His Kingdom. Isn't that thrilling?

But it is even better. This Kingdom – the Kingdom of Jesus – it is also *our* Kingdom. We are not mere servants in the Kingdom. We are owners or, to use another metaphor, we are sons and heirs of the Kingdom. Because we are united to Christ, who is the firstborn Son and heir, we also are sons and heirs. And so God says to us: "Fear not! This Kingdom – it's yours. Enjoy it. Work in it. Take care of it." And if that sounds like drudgery, remember that Jesus is your partner. He will do the heavy lifting. You get to help while Jesus does the hard work. And after a hard day's work we get to recline at the table while Jesus serves us.

Is this good news? Have we chased away the gloom? Or are you thinking, "No thanks. I'll just take my salvation and enjoy it without all this work and responsibility." Fine. You can say that. But Jesus will get to you eventually. Jesus will not force you, but sooner or later you will wake up and realize what a fool you have been. Even then Jesus will not condemn you. Jesus will welcome you to work along side Him and give you good, fulfilling tasks. There will always be a place for you at Jesus' table.

What now?

So now you are the proud owner of a glorious Kingdom. What will you do next? **First**, keep doing what you have been doing. Jesus is building His Kingdom through your labors. Jesus does not often call people to abandon their jobs and families and homes. He has done that, but only a few times. For every Abraham, there are millions of Jobs who serve God in the community and vocation where He has put them. However, you can be more conscious about fulfilling your responsibilities as Kingdom-building activities. You can offer these activities to God by praying for His blessing and asking God to use you to serve Him in new and surprising ways in your daily activities. Going out for the mail you may notice God giving you the opportunity to talk with your neighbor. Perhaps you can include a needy person in your lunch break. Jesus is building His Kingdom through your labors, and He will use you in the midst of your present activities.

Second, what special service can you offer in the Kingdom? Some of you are already serving as deacons, some in music, some are teaching Sunday School, etc. Very well. But there are always more opportunities for service. Simply as an example, we could use a few more people to sign up for the coffee hour snacks before church. This is not a desperate need, but it does serve a purpose in the life of our church. And it does not take special talents. Is this something you could do? More challenging is managing the prayer list. We have noticed that sometimes things are slow to be added or slow to be removed, and usually we have no idea what becomes of these people. This is not the job of the pastor. It would be helpful for someone to give this weekly attention.

But when Jesus offered an example of Kingdom responsibility, He chose the needy. Some of us are struggling with hurts and needs, and need someone to visit and share our burdens. This is hard. What do you say to someone who is hurting? Most of us have not been trained as counselors. Some of us often feel tongue-tied, especially in situations like this. The important thing to remember is that Jesus is your partner. He will go with you into awkward conversations and difficult relationships. You may not have much to say,

but Jesus may use your presence to minister powerfully to a hurting person. Do you think you can trust Him to do that? Then there is the topic which elicits fear in many Christians: evangelism. Much fear is misplaced, sometimes by unbalanced teaching. Most of us are not called to be evangelists. But can't you invite people to church? Can you trust Jesus to use you somehow in the life of the unbelievers you know?

In organizations 20% of the people typically do 80% of the work. This seems to be true everywhere, including the church. If you fall into the 80% who are not much involved, this is not a rebuke, but an invitation. God has given you His Kingdom and offers you an important role in it. Do not ignore God, but offer yourself to join Him in His work.

The Joyful Kingdom

Are you scared now? Does caring for some needy person intimidate you? Do unbelievers frighten you? If you set out to minister to some lonely person, or someone who is poor or sick, or someone who is needy but ornery – it could be difficult and exhausting. Most unbelievers are pleasant people, but some are difficult. To this Jesus says, "Fear not!" He who has given you this Kingdom will not abandon you to drudgery or failure. Running a Kingdom is a lot of work, but working with Jesus is enjoyable. Jesus will do the heavy lifting. We get the pleasure of pitching in and seeing our efforts yield big results. And even as you labor in this life, you are reaping rewards in heaven – an eternal treasure which will never be stolen by thieves or devalued by inflation or ruined by insects. And then we will enjoy a great feast served by Jesus Himself. God has given you a Kingdom. Jesus calls you to work with Him in it, and will never condemn you for your efforts. We have this privilege now, and the promise of a glorious future. Do you believe this? It is too good to be true, but this is the word of Jesus. Does Jesus tell the truth? Do you trust Him?

Jesus promises to serve us at the great banquet in eternity, and as proof that this promise is true, He provides an appetizer. Jesus is here today with bread to strengthen us for the work and wine to make our hearts glad. Today we feast on earth so that someday we may feast in heaven. And in the great mystery of the Eucharist, Jesus Himself enters and fills us as we eat and drink – so that we leave here in the presence and power of the Spirit of Almighty God to fulfill His will. Jesus is here, so fear not!

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we are a fearful people. We are deeply comforted to know that you understand us and do not condemn us for our fears. But you are our Father, Jesus is our brother, and the Spirit is our Helper, so there is nothing to fear. Banish our fears, dear God. Inspire us to work in your Kingdom. Energize us to serve the poor and needy. Teach us to work joyfully with Jesus as He saves the world. Send us into the world in the power of the Spirit, in the love of God, with the gospel of salvation. Amen.

Ascription

All glory, honor, and power be to the Father who loves us, and to the Son who rules the Kingdom of Heaven, and to the Spirit who equips us for every good work. Blessed be His Kingdom now and forever!

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