



Do Not Be Afraid, I Am with You

A sermon by the Rev. Susan Bek

Proper 14, Year C

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16 ☒ Luke 12:32-40

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Do you ever get overwhelmed by the news? Or limit your exposure so that you don't get completely burned out? Compassion fatigue is a very real thing. Trauma affects us, even second hand. Tragedy doesn't have to fall on us for it to take a personal toll. Generosity and good deeds have an effect on us too, even second hand. We don't always have to be the ones that give or help for it to benefit us. Sometimes, just hearing the story is enough to cause a very real, physical response. We are creatures of compassion, just as God designed us to be.

In today's sermon, I'll share with you the lyrics from a song called You are Mine by David Haas. We'll look at today's lesson from Hebrews and the gospel from Luke, and we'll explore the answers to these important questions, "What can we hold on to in the face of the overwhelming challenges of our time?" and "How do we keep ourselves from becoming numb or calloused, which may help us cope, but also separates us emotionally from the needs of others?" I don't know about you, but I don't ever want to feel indifferent to the pain of another. I think there is great strength in remembering that we are all one in the eyes of God, one big, beautiful diverse and beloved family.

Let's start with some lyrics.

I will come to you in the silence
I will lift you from all your fear
You will hear My voice
I claim you as My choice
Be still, and know I am near

I am hope for all who are hopeless
I am eyes for all who long to see
In the shadows of the night,
I will be your light
Come and rest in Me

God calls us to put our faith into action, but God also calls us to rest, to be still so that we can know and experience being in the presence of the Divine. In the stillness, we can hear the voice of the One who created us, redeems us and sustains us.

In the stillness we can confront our hopelessness and, if we are patient, there we will find the hope the world cannot give, the understanding that is beyond our grasp. Even in the darkest of times, there we will find light.

And, sometimes, you can locate the light by simply repeating a short phrase like, “Come and rest in me. Come and rest in me. Come and rest in me.”

The lyrics continue...

Do not be afraid, I am with you
I have called you each by name
Come and follow Me
I will bring you home
I love you and you are mine

These words have been with me all week. I’ve found great comfort in them. I understand them as words of faith, but many do not know faith and wonder what it is.

Today’s lesson from Hebrews explains that faith is, “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Faith carried our ancestors through many challenges, and that same faith is still available to us today. By faith Abraham obeyed. By faith Sarah, though a very old woman by then, bore a child. By faith Isaac and Jacob endured and received power, and by faith they all died, each in their own time, and were welcomed into the heavenly country where God had prepared a place for them.

When you read scripture, you see that we are not the only ones who have lived in challenging times. Some of them were called out of their homelands, some driven into the dessert where they wandered for 40 years, again and again they were challenged and conquered, persecuted, imprisoned, exiled, and even crucified. How did the people of the past hold fast to their faith? What did they do in times of conflict and pain to stir their faith and keep believing? They told their sacred stories and sang songs of hope and praise.

In that same way, the lyrics that have been present in my mind have been sustaining me in my faith, and that’s why I’m sharing them with you.

The song goes on...

I am strength for all the despairing
Healing for the ones who dwell in shame
All the blind will see, the lame will all run free
And all will know My name

Jesus said to his disciples, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where

no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

We need not be afraid, everything that is truly important, will be given to us not because we've earned it, or because we're good enough, favored enough or because we've scored enough points, but because it is the Father's good pleasure to give it. Because God loves us.

Meanwhile, we need not fear, even though there is plenty to be afraid of in this world. Something better awaits us beyond this world, and we don't have to wait for it to experience it. We're actually called to help usher in the kingdom by aligning the ways of the world with the ways of God. When we do that, great things will happen. Change is possible but when and how things will change is up to us.

Remember God is with us, all of us. The minute any group of people begins to believe that God is with them to the exclusion of others, trouble begins. As Presiding Bishop Michael Curry likes to say, "If it's not about Love, it's not about God." I think we can add to that, "if it's not for the good of everyone, it's not for the good of anyone."

Words like, "Do not be afraid," and, "fear not," occur in the bible over three hundred times. Why? Perhaps because fear, itself is a very dangerous thing. It is the weapon terrorists use to the greatest affect. They want us to be afraid because fear causes a whole host of physical, mental and emotional responses. Among them, anger, disgust, panic, depression, and isolation. People who are afraid are prone to giving up and giving in. Also, the term, "paralyzed by fear," is a very real thing. Fear is exhausting, even debilitating. It keeps us from being able to access the strength we need to respond and impedes our ability to bring about change.

Let's address the questions we started with at the beginning of this sermon.

- 1) "What can we hold on to in the face of the overwhelming challenges of our time?" Rather than fear, hold on to God, hold on to hope, hold on to our sacred stories and sing songs of praise and thanksgiving. Love God and one another. Remember that simple phrases can transport us into the silence where we encounter the the God who is constantly calling out to us, "Come and rest in me."
- 2) "How do we keep ourselves from becoming numb or calloused, which may help us cope, but also separates us emotionally from the needs of others? By being the generous and compassionate creatures God created us to be. Studies show that compassion boosts our immune response, makes us healthier and happier and motivates action. It increases empathy and makes us less afraid. ¹

¹ "8 Wonderful Psychological Effects of Being Compassionate." *PsyBlog*, 16 Oct. 2016, www.spring.org.uk/2014/02/8-wonderful-psychological-effects-of-being-compassionate.php.

Jesus instructed his disciples, “make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys.” Instead of fear, faith and to protect ourselves from becoming overwhelmed and indifferent, generosity. Generosity is our defense against indifference.

What treasure do we have to give? Out of our abundance we can give money, but also time, influence, care and concern, thoughts and prayers, voice and vote. We can stand up, give generously and help in so many important ways.

We give of this treasure in the name of Christ and on behalf of our beloved brothers and sisters because, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

How does the song end?

I am the Word that leads all to freedom
I am the peace the world cannot give
I will call your name, embracing all your pain
Stand up, now, walk, and live

Do not be afraid, I am with you
I have called you each by name
Come and follow Me
I will bring you home
I love you and you are mine

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.