

“Do Not Be Afraid”

“Do not be afraid.” Gideon had just been called by God to lead his people against their enemies. Gideon had spoken to the Angel of the Lord without fully realizing that this was the Lord. He set an offering of bread and meat before his visitor, and when the Angel of the Lord disappeared in the flash of fire that consumed his offering, Gideon knew exactly to whom he had been speaking. And he was terrified. He had seen God himself, face to face. He could think of nothing but his weaknesses and shortcomings and sins. And then God spoke to him those comforting words, “Do not be afraid” (Judges 6:23).

The virgin Mary was visited one day by the angel Gabriel. Gabriel greeted Mary and called her “highly favored.” Mary was startled by such a greeting and the appearance of the angel who brought it to her, but Gabriel went on to dismiss her doubts and concerns. “Do not be afraid,” he said to her (Luke 1:30).

About nine months later came the wonderful event we celebrate as Christmas. That night some shepherds were watching their flocks in the fields near Bethlehem. An angel appeared to them, too. The angel lit up the sky with the glory of the Lord, and the lowly shepherds cowered in fear. But the first thing the angel said to them was, “Do not be afraid” (Luke 2:10).

People with reason to be afraid. People who were seeing things they had never seen before. People who were comforted by the word of God, including the simple comfort of that phrase: “Do not be afraid.”

That same phrase closes the text before us this morning. “Do not be afraid.” Jesus spoke these words to his disciples who were gathered around him. He was not shining in glory the way he once had on the mountain of the transfiguration, and the disciples to whom he spoke were not cowering in fear. Before them sat Jesus, the man that they had followed for years. He looked like he always did as he shared with them important spiritual truths, though perhaps tonight he seemed a bit more serious or somber.

And certainly he had serious and somber news to share. He would be betrayed. He would be killed. Where he was going they could not go. They would all abandon him, and he would soon no longer be with them.

Do you see why the disciples might have been afraid? Perhaps at that moment they were not afraid, but they did not clearly understand, as Jesus did, what would come next. That very night armed men would come to arrest him. One of their own would lead them to Jesus and arrange his arrest. The religious leaders would put him on trial and execute him. And they would be left without him.

He was their leader. He was their Messiah. He was their friend. They walked with him and talked with him for years. They trusted him with their very lives. They had seen him calm storms, walk

on water, feed thousands with a lunchbox of food, and even make dead people alive again. What would they do without him?

Would they cower in fear and lock themselves inside where the enemies who had killed their leader might not find them? Would they be confused by every strange report that they heard about him? Would they perhaps even doubt the eternal life and salvation that he had promised to them, especially as they thought about the times they had abandoned him, or argued about petty things in front of him, or disagreed with him, or simply didn't listen? Wouldn't they be afraid?

Jesus said, "All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."

Jesus would be leaving the disciples, and he would no longer walk with them and talk with them as he once had, but he was not leaving them alone. He promised them the Counselor to teach and to remind them of the things Jesus had said to them. And he left them with his peace. He came to earth to bring them peace, he went to his death on the cross to bring them peace, he taught them to bring them peace, and he sent his Holy Spirit to bring them peace. Jesus took away the sin of the disciples so that they could be at peace with God. And if they were at peace with God, even their consciences could be peaceful, no matter what was happening to them or around them.

And isn't Pentecost an amazing reminder of and fulfillment of Christ's promise? The disciples had watched Jesus ascend up into heaven just ten days earlier. In the meantime, they quietly went about their business. But on that special day, God sent his Holy Spirit to those disciples in a way that would command attention and provide opportunity for them to share their faith. Speaking in languages they had never before learned or studied, the disciples were able to tell the crowd about Jesus. They were able to assure them that Jesus died for their sins and that eternal life was theirs through faith.

The outward signs were flashy, and the power of the Holy Spirit did come on those disciples in a special way, but everything about that Pentecost served the purpose of teaching and reminding about Jesus and sharing his peace. The disciples did not learn or say anything new, but by God's grace they finally understood what Jesus had been teaching them and how they were to share it as his witnesses. They were no longer afraid.

Today at Pentecost, Jesus announces to us through his Word: "Do not be afraid." What are we afraid of? Are you afraid of being looked down on if you were to share your faith with others? Are you afraid of pain or suffering that might come about as a result of sickness or disease? Are you afraid simply of not knowing what the future holds? Or perhaps, as many people, you are afraid of being known for what you truly are and for all the unkind things you have thought and said and done.

At the root of all our fears lies our constant enemy, sin. The horrible possibilities that might lie in our futures are the result of sin. The lingering fear that all is not right between us and God comes because we know all too well how we have not loved and honored God as he deserves.

And those fears are why we need the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit works through Word and Sacrament to bring us to faith and to strengthen us in our faith, our trust and our confidence that Jesus is our Savior from sin. The work of the Spirit in our hearts and lives may not be as flashy and outwardly obvious as it was for the disciples on Pentecost, but it is just as certain. The Scriptures testify that without the Holy Spirit no one can come to a true faith. **“No one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit”** (1 Corinthians 12:3).

But the Holy Spirit works in our hearts through the power of the Word to allow us to understand and believe what Jesus teaches. Through the Spirit we understand that the death of Jesus on the cross was to pay the price for our sins. Through the Spirit we understand that we have been clothed with his righteous life, that baptism washes away all our sins, and that we have been adopted into God’s family. Through the Spirit we know that we are at peace with God and that no enemy or trial or temptation can take that away from us. In other words, through faith in Jesus Christ, we have peace with God.

And that means that no matter what we face in this life, we do not need to hide in fear. We can go forward as the disciples did in bold confidence. We can offer our time, and our talents, and our treasures to serve God. We can teach and we can encourage, and we can share with others the wonderful news of peace with God through Jesus Christ. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. You have the Holy Spirit, and you have the peace of Jesus.