

Sermon: I Wonder as I Wander
Text: Luke 12:32-40
Date: August 11, 2019
Context: WWPC
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

Luke 12:32

You might think that faith would be the main theme of the Bible. That faith and the way God's people live it and understand it and practice it, that this would be the central pillar, the main narrative driver of all of scripture.

And to a very large degree you would be right. The passage we just heard from Hebrews affirms that this is true. For after Abraham, the writer provides a full list of the giants of the faith, a veritable hall of fame of the Bible's greatest faith practitioners. And their stories are legendary. Abraham, yes. Moses, yes. David yes. Obviously.

But the list includes less familiar names, too, with their own stories. Rahab the harlot. Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, Samuel and the prophets— who through faith, as the writer notes, *conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.*

Oh yes, *and women who received their dead by resurrection.*

That is big stuff. So faith and how God's people practice and embody it, and how they sometimes wage it, is to a very large degree the narrative driver of scripture.

But here is what's surprising about that. Faith, per se, is rarely mentioned in the Bible, comparatively speaking. In my Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of biblical words, the listings for "faith" take up roughly half a page. The listings for "house" by contrast take up close to five full pages.

It turns out that in these famous stories, the great heroes and heroines of the faith don't talk about faith so much. Instead they just show us what it looks like in practice.

But if you find that surprising, as I do, then just wait, because there's an even bigger surprise built into these stories of faith, a kind of perennially recurring twist that plays out over and over again.

Most of the characters named on this list get their marching orders directly from God, or God's direct envoy.

Go Abram, for I'm about to make of you a great nation.

Go Moses, for I'm hereby commissioning you to liberate my people.

And into the New Testament, *Hello, Mary, have I got a big surprise for you.*

These tales, and others, about God's faithful servants are the very best stories in Bible, and yet how do most of them begin?

What two words serve as the introduction to almost every one of these stories? You might be tempted to answer, "Have faith." But that would not be correct.

Rather the answer is almost always, can you guess it: *Fear not.*

Which raises the question of why? Why do these stories in which God enlists very ordinary people just like us to do extraordinary things start out this way? Why is it almost always "Fear not" and hardly ever, "Have faith"?

Perhaps the obvious answer is that God knows our internal schematics. God knows we're not wired for faith, we're wired for fear.

And there's a deep biological and existential reason for that. Fear keeps us alive and safe.

Fear keeps us from walking down dark alleys in New York City after a Broadway show. Fear keeps us from walking along the edge of jagged cliffs--well, at least most of us. Fear keeps us from taking a casual stroll, unprotected, on a savanna filled with hungry lions.

Fear keeps us from picking up a snake we cannot identify. Or really any snake, ever, if you're me.

In many ways our survival depends on our ability to feel fear and our willingness to head the warning siren it sets off in our head.

And yet it can work the other way, too. Fear can itself be poisonous.

And of course we're seeing this play out all across this country almost on a daily basis. Indeed, I would argue that fear is the dominant force of our age. Fear has been weaponized over the last couple of years, and it is no longer protecting us. It is slowly killing us.

Literally.

Fear of the other. Fear of people whose skin is darker than mine. Fear of people who don't think like us, or worship like we do. Fear of people who like different food, who observe different customs, who celebrate different holidays. Fear of people who prefer a different kind of football than the one played in the NFL.

Americans have been lead to believe that these people -- these people -- are a threat. They're dangerous. They're coming to rape our women and flood our streets with drugs and take our jobs.

But they're not just coming to take our jobs, they're coming to take our country. They're coming to dismantle our very way of life, to do away with our most sacred traditions. To alter the skin color of our neighborhoods.

They are lions prowling our streets and we are the prey. We have to stop them before they reach us.

And with disheartening and truly alarming frequency, we've seen what happens when you pound that drum long and loud enough. Some people have grown so afraid they've succumbed to the belief that the only way to stop these people, to keep them from invading our country and ending our way of life, is to kill them.

Be afraid. Be very, very afraid. That is the mantra of our time.

The writer and historian Diana Butler Bass identifies this kind of speech at the language of the anti-Christ.

By this term, she does not mean a bogey-man figure with 666 tattooed on his forehead who has come to lead the forces of darkness in a final battle against God's people on the plains of Armageddon.

She means simply that this kind of fear-based rhetoric is directly at odds with the teachings of Jesus. It is anti-the-spirit-of-Christ, if you prefer.

And it's easy to see what she means. Fear makes us suspicious. Fear can make us violent. Fear can make us hateful. The very opposite of the qualities Jesus worked so hard to instill in his followers.

So what is to be done?

Conventional wisdom would suggest that the antidote to fear is courage. Which of course does not mean that you don't feel fear. You just jump out of the airplane despite the knot in your stomach and your dry mouth, and trust that the guy who packed your chute back at the hanger knew what he was doing.

You stand up to give your speech in front of a packed house anyway, and you trust your notes to guide you, even though your palms are so sweaty you could not hold a glass of water if someone handed you one.

But I think it's possible that the point of the biblical record, and the reason all these stories about the heroes and heroines of the faith start out with a charge to fear not, is to show us that the antidote to fear is not courage.

The antidote to fear is faith.

The Bible defines faith precisely once, in Hebrews 11:1. *Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.*

That certainly has a poetic ring to it, but what does that mean? Well what do the stories about the people named in the list that follows tell us? What do these stories show us?

Faith is the power to see past the things we do see to the things we do not yet see.

Faith is a quality of the heart and of the mind that says I don't have to have all the evidence in front of me in order to decide, in order to begin.

Faith is a willingness to go when God says it's time to pick up your stakes. Faith is the openness to start a journey without knowing the final destination, or even how you're going to get there.

And then once underway, faith is the willingness (to borrow Jim Wallis's great phrase) to believe despite the evidence and then to keep believing until the evidence changes.

You can imagine the conversations about how all this would work.

So, Abram, how exactly will God use you to make of us a great nation? I mean not to be picky but you and Sarah, well that window has closed, if you know what I mean.

I haven't a clue, really. But here's what I do know, see those stars? The same God who scattered all of those twinkling lights throughout the heavens, that same God is the one who made that promise, not me. So as travel toward our future, as we wander together down the road ahead of us, let the wonder of that promise, and of those stars, astound you.

So, Moses, how will we get out of Egypt?

Great question. I guess we're about to find out.

Yes, but if we escape Pharaoh's army alive, and that's a big if, we're still surrounded by desert. How will we get through this infernal wilderness?

I have no idea, other than we take one step at a time. And in doing that, God will guide us home.

Yes, but how do you know that?

I don't know that. I believe that. Now let's go.

* * *

Not that any of this happens easily, mind you. Faith is not magic.

‘Do not be afraid, little flock,’ Jesus says to his disciples, “for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” Which is to say, it is God’s intention to bless you and provide for you.

And then what follows? Evidently Jesus operates on the assumption that you show your faith in this promise by what you do. You gear up. You dress for action. You light your lamps.

And then you head out, and you look up at the night sky, and you let your heart and your mind fill with wonder as you wander purposefully down the road ahead, trusting God to guide you home.

Amen.