

For weeks now, we've been exploring Luke's vision of the Kingdom of Heaven: how we are to proclaim it, we are to invite others to experience it, we are to embody it, we are to pray for it, we are to give generously to others to manifest it, and now we are to resist complacency as we await the completion of it.

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

That phrase, do not be afraid, is one that has always intrigued me. The Gospels are sprinkled with these sorts of "fear nots," and each one is immediately followed by a blessing:

the angel appearing before Zechariah¹ (*Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John*), (do you hear echoes of our reading from Genesis about Abram here?)

again when the angel comes before Mary to announce her pregnancy² (*Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus*),

again when the angel appears before the shepherds³ (*Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord*),

again when Jesus tells Peter he will be a fisher of men, again when Jesus tells Jairus his daughter will live, etc., etc.

The exhortation to not fear is a sure sign that a blessing will follow.

And here we are with Jesus saying, 'do not be afraid, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.'

When you dig into the Greek and analyze the verb tense, it is clear that God's mind is already made up ~ the gift is already in the process of being handed over. And if

¹ Luke 1:13

² Luke 1:30

³ Luke 2:10

that weren't blessing enough, it is compounded with God delighting in the giving of this gift.

Earlier this week, I listened to Ira Glass on *This American Life*, and in my opinion, for a guy who describes himself as not believing in God, he did an amazing job of describing the relationship between faith and the Kingdom of God.⁴ Ira told about how he recently went to synagogue to pray the Kaddish for his mother – the set of prayers of praise Jews pray on the anniversary of the death of a loved one. Ira explains that in the Jewish community, the faithful still gather, day after day, year after year, praying the same prayers, singing the same hymns, to extol the greatness of God. And they engage in these acts of devotion, which transcend human understanding and experience, in spite of – and as an expression of – their grief and struggle.

The first half goes like this:

*May His great name be exalted and sanctified, in the world which He created according to His will! May He establish His kingdom and may His salvation blossom and His anointed be near during your lifetime and during your days and during the lifetimes of all the House of Israel speedily and very soon! May His great name be blessed for ever, and to all eternity! Blessed and praised, glorified and exalted, extolled and honored, adored and lauded be the name of the Holy One, blessed be He, above and beyond all the blessings, hymns, praises and consolations that are uttered in the world!*⁵

As Ira recited these prayers, he says he began to wonder, 'What role does praise play in the life of the faith community? Certainly, God is not that needy.' And so he asked a friend who is a Christian minister who basically invited Ira to reframe his paradigm: rather than think of God as an old man in the sky who demands that his children sit around for some period of time every day telling him how great he is, perhaps consider God as the embodiment of all the values and principles in the Scriptures – to love others, to be honest, to live with integrity, to be humble and generous of spirit. He explained to Ira that prayers of praise are a way for the community to re-pledge themselves to these virtues and to recommit themselves to

⁴ <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/680/the-weight-of-words>

⁵ <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kaddish>

behave in ways that are honorable and that manifest those ideals, and that by doing so, the community enters into a life of faith.

Ira went on to remark that the Kaddish and other prayers of praise and thanksgiving that he recited growing up were the same prayers that his parents learned from and prayed with their parents ... his grandparents with his great grandparents ... and back and back ... not only making a pledge for themselves to act a certain way in the world, but also teaching future generations how to pledge themselves to the values of their faith community. In his storytelling, Ira expresses awe and wonderment at the lived faith of the people of God throughout the past, now, and going forward.

The story of Ira's spiritual genealogy is our story, too. The stories of Scripture passed down through the generations, the prayers of the faithful, the communion of saints, the liturgies and rituals of our communal life all shape our understanding of who we are and reveal the character and promise of God. God's choice to bless us with grace and mercy and unconditional love was made at the dawn of creation, and God continues to delight in giving us this blessing. (Which, Luke points out in our Gospel this morning, does not mean that we can take a pass on living lives of integrity and charity – it is of course important to take seriously our pledge to be honorable and intentional in our dealings with the rest of God's creation.)

The Kingdom of God is already done deal, **and** it's not yet here. Life and peace and abundance and grace are all right here for the asking.

The author of Hebrews defines faith as 'the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.'⁶

Hebrews describes faith as that which keeps us looking up and looking out; we are journeying with and toward God. This faith is rooted in the assurance that we do not create - or maintain - the Kingdom of God: that is accomplished through the word of God, and is the result of God's good pleasure. Rather, when we engage our faith, we move toward a way of living where we have to leave behind the life we have known to embrace the kingdom God has created. In other words, we are immigrants to God's Kingdom:⁷ a people journeying toward the world God has created.⁸

⁶ Hebrews 11:1

⁷ This idea is fleshed out in Lauren Winner's book *Wearing God*.

⁸ Adapted from The Rev. Mark Ramsey at http://day1.org/8412-mark_ramsey_today

It is a very courageous way of living that will test us as it dislocates us, as it drives us deeper into dependence in God. We are called to follow, even like Sarah and Abraham, not knowing our destination. We are called to seek and anticipate a homeland whose architect and builder is God. As such, we are called to proclaim and to invite and to embody and to pray and to give *even before we fully understand*. We are called to act with love and hope even if we do not yet have any sense of assurance or conviction that the living God will guide us to the city of God's design. So if any of us here are seeking faith, that assurance and conviction that you do not yet possess, then I'm glad you've come this morning lean in to the proclamation, invitation, embodiment, prayers and gifts of those who do.

We live in a Darwinian culture fraught with violence and threats of violence, constantly hearing that more is better and there will never be enough, that you will never be enough ...

But do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

We are not on the brink of destruction; we are on the brink of blessing upon blessing. We are told that Jesus will return like a thief in the night, and we are to be on the watch, trusting that there is nothing to fear. We are to pray and we are to praise - not only with our lips, but with our lives - recommitting ourselves to ways of being that glorify God.

I'll close with the second half of the Kaddish, that Jewish prayer of praise which gives voice to those virtues we seek to embody:

May the prayers and supplications of all [the faithful] be accepted by their Father who is in Heaven. To Israel, to the Rabbis and their disciples, to the disciples of their disciples, and to all those who engage in the study of Torah in this holy place or in any other place, may there come abundant peace, grace, loving-kindness and compassion, long life, ample sustenance and salvation from the Father who is in heaven and earth. May there be abundant peace from heaven, and good life, satisfaction, help, comfort, refuge, healing, redemption, forgiveness, atonement, relief and salvation for us and for all his people Israel. May He who makes peace in His high places grant in his mercy peace upon us and upon all [God's people]. Amen and Amen.