

“Fear Not!
Isaiah 65: 17-25; Luke 21: 5-19
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So, I did not want to preach on this passage this morning. I tried very hard not to have to read it and preach on it, but it was the lectionary reading for this the 26th Sunday in the Season of Pentecost and ultimately on Friday I decided I had to do it and I changed everything in the bulletin, much to Walker’s dismay.

Now before we move ahead, I know several of you have been to seminary but a lot of you have not. So those of you with seminary degrees, can zone out for a minute while I explain what the Lectionary is. Let’s start with the word “lection.” That just means a Biblical passage or selection. And a lectionary (and you can look this up in Wikipedia) is a book or listing that contains a collection of scripture readings assigned to use in worship for a given day or week. Most congregations in the UCC (along with most mainline Protestant denominations and the Roman Catholic Church) use the Revised Common Lectionary which gives us a 3-year cycle of recommended readings for each Sunday. So that’s why on most Sundays you might discover that we read the same Biblical passages as the folks across the street or even in some church on the other side of the world. The lectionary is designed so the church will read most of the Bible during the three-year cycle...and it helps insure that your preacher doesn’t just pick her favorite passages to preach on week after week. Sometimes we have to deal with passages we really don’t want to deal with.

So why did I resist this passage so much this week? Actually I resist passages like this all the time because the content is what we call “eschatological.” Again, a nice seminary word that just means “stuff about the end of the world, the end of time.” There are quite a few eschatological passages in the Bible but my favorite thing that Jesus said about all of that is “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father....Therefore you must be ready, for the son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour” (Matt 24: 36, 44). In seminary we translated that, “Look busy. Jesus is coming!” Or even better, in Luke (17:20-21) when the Pharisees ask Jesus when the Kingdom of God will come, he said, “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For the Kingdom of God is among you.” So keeping those verses in mind, I don’t like to spend a lot of time worrying about when Jesus might return or the End Times might start, because Jesus said even HE didn’t know. I also have noticed that people who spend a lot of time studying the eschatological passages of scripture generally are trying to figure out all the different “signs” that are mentioned and whether or not we are on the verge of the Apocalypse.

Ok, now a little digression about the Apocalypse. Earlier this week Brenda Lewis was telling me about what happened to her on Wed morning when she walked into the class she teaches at UNC-A. She said about ¾ of the students were crying and they looked at her and said, “Why aren’t you crying?” She answered, “Because this isn’t my first Apocalypse.” She then asked the students if they knew what the word apocalypse means and they said, “The end of the world.” But Brenda is a smart woman and she’s been to seminary, too. So she said, “Let’s look it up.”

And while in common parlance the word has come to mean the cataclysmic end of the world, in Greek the word *apokálypsis* means "uncovering", a lifting of the veil or revelation. "In religious contexts it is usually... a vision of heavenly secrets that can make sense of earthly realities". We find these kind of visions most prominently in the last book in our Bible that we know as "Revelation." But in the original Greek the word is *apokalypsis*, Apocalypse, Revelation.

And so Brenda went on to challenge her students to think about what the election has revealed about us, about our country, about the time we live in. Her students said it was too soon, they weren't ready on the morning after the election to do that yet. And maybe sitting here 5 days later you're not ready to do that yet either. But it's an important exercise for all of us. We should not spend too much time celebrating or bemoaning the outcome. We all know that this entire election season was terribly divisive and difficult. And if nothing else it revealed quite dramatically that we live in a country that is deeply and disturbingly divided, and not just along political lines. We are divided by race and gender and sexual orientation, by education and socio-economic class, by ethnicity, age and geography. All you have to do is take a quick look at the maps from election central to see that people in Midwest and the South look at the world, experience the world, very differently from people in the Northeast and along the West coast. We know that. We've known it for a long time, but now we hear results of elections in terms of the Latino vote, the Black vote, the suburban white women's vote, the uneducated white men's vote, the millennials and the boomers...like we can be summed up by our demographic label.

That's not how God sees us. God doesn't see us as black or white, rich or poor, gay or straight. God sees each one of us as a Beloved child, no matter how old we are, what color our skin is, what candidates we vote for. We're the ones who separate ourselves from God's other beloved children by using labels and allowing others to make us fearful of those who look or dress or worship or speak differently than we do.

I entitled this sermon "Fear Not" because I think when we live our lives in fear we are at our worst, when we respond to other people out of our fears, nothing good ever happens. I think our politicians play on our fears all the time, using scare tactics to make us afraid of the future, afraid of each other, afraid that there's not enough to go around, afraid that we aren't getting our fair share of the pie. As I tried hard to not have to preach on this passage this morning, I decided to look up the phrases "Fear not" or "Do not be afraid" in the Bible. There are well over 200 verses with those words which made it too hard to choose! But then I looked at this passage from Luke 21 again, and in it, in the midst of Jesus' monologue about all kinds of bad things that await his followers: destruction of the temple, wars and insurrections, earthquakes, famines, plagues, arrests, betrayal, he says, "Don't be terrified!" Really? Don't be terrified...because God promises that "not a hair on your head will perish" and "by your endurance you will gain your souls."

Wednesday morning, while I was getting ready to come to church, I found this post on a Facebook Group called Sisters of Sophia.

"Everything we cherish is still the same. The dreams we have, the commitment to help make things better, the hope for a nation and all those it touches, the fundamental relationship in our lives to Justice and Love - none of this has changed. Our work just got a little more challenging - and that has never prevented us from being who we are or

accomplishing what we have accomplished. Fear can have no role in our lives or the way we live them. We made that choice long before this election. Nor can that change as we take the road ahead - higher. We will not just survive this election -- we will thrive. We always have. And we will do it together...one day at a time."

In this passage from Luke, Jesus doesn't paint a full picture of what might come after the time of destruction and devastation that he predicts. But fortunately for us, the Lectionary also recommended that we read this beautiful description of a new heaven and a new earth that Isaiah paints for us. This lyrical passage of promised restoration and new life was written after the people of Israel had spent decades in exile, cut off from the land and people they loved, only to return to the harsh realities of trying to rebuild their country. Isaiah assures them that God is faithful and if *they* stay faithful this is the new world they will live in. A world of peace and justice, with no more weeping and distress, no hurting each other or God's other creations, a place where everyone has a safe home and meaningful work. A place where we all can live together in joy and happiness.

This is God's promise to us. Let us live into it together. Remember Jesus said, "The Kingdom of God is not out there somewhere waiting to happen. It is *among* you!" Let's move forward together. Not one step back!