

Pentecost 12C + August 7, 2016
Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit
Luke 12:32-40

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“Have Good Cheer”

The quest for security—fraught with anxiety—is common to most of us. What will the future bring? What will happen to me when my husband dies? How much longer can I manage to live independently? Is my recent forgetfulness a sign of early-onset Alzheimer’s? What if I invest what little I have left, and then the stock market crashes? What if.....?

Last week we were thinking about the wealthy farmer who was creating a false sense of security by storing up his excess crops in bigger and bigger barns. He was looking forward to an easy future – “I will say to my soul, relax, eat, drink, and be merry!” But then God told him his life was being taken that very night.

Around the world every day things happen to people that annihilate their sense of security. Most devastating is the unexpected death of loved ones. What about the loss of one’s home—in California’s Malibu Canyon to a wildfire, or in Indonesia to several feet of boiling mud? This is still happening in East Java, in fact, from a volcano that has been spewing millions of gallons of mud into the air each day for 10 years and has destroyed dozens of villages. Of course, the magnitude of loss is inversely proportional to the wealth of those affected. Who in East Java has insurance money to replace their thatched hut?

We already know not to place all our hope in that which we can see and touch. In the second reading assigned for today, the first part of Hebrews 11, we hear that “faith is the

assurance of things *hoped for*, the conviction of things not seen.” Christian hope is not a wish; it is a conviction. Faith is our utter confidence that God’s promises are true.

For the Israelites in the Old Testament, this meant believing that God will act. That is the faith Abraham had in Genesis 15 when he believed what God told him—that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. That faith, Genesis goes on to say, was “reckoned to him as righteousness.”

In the New Testament, faith lies in our conviction that God has *already* acted. Listen again to the beginning of our Gospel reading for today: “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” The victory over death in Jesus Christ has already brought about a new reality, a new world order in which Jesus eats with tax collectors, sinners, and the outcast. Remember two weeks ago when we said that to experience salvation is to share—right here and right now—in the enterprise that is the kingdom of God? Love, not hate, is the foundation for all that we do. Generosity, not greed; humility, not hubris; justice, not judgment; compassion, not condemnation. All this is possible because we have been forgiven in Christ for all that we have done. So how could we not in turn forgive others?

To love fully and forgive fully means living without fear and letting go of all the anxieties that compel us to place our trust in things and not in God. “Do not be afraid,” Jesus tells us in today’s Gospel reading. It sounds so easy: Don’t be afraid. But it’s not. Living in fear is second nature for many people. So how can we let go of this?

Thinking this over, it occurred to me that perhaps we don’t need a deep theological argument here. Notice the next two words in our Gospel verse: “Do not fear, *little flock*.” So I thought: What if we think of ourselves as sheep? Maybe it’s just that simple! Now, many of you are farm experts and I have no experience with livestock. But here are a few things I looked up.

1. Sheep have a strong flocking instinct. This is the only protection they have from predators, because it's harder for a wolf to pluck a sheep from the whole group than to go after a few strays. What does this mean for us? It means that we are strongest when we remain in community, where we find support and fellowship. This way it's much harder for Satan to get at us.

2. Sheep have a strong following instinct. When one sheep moves, the rest will follow. What does this mean? Christ is the head of the church and Jesus is our shepherd, so we are to do and go as Jesus tells and leads us. But this also means that we must be discerning about who our leader is. Ten years ago in Turkey, 400 sheep plunged to their death because one stepped off the edge of a deep ravine, thinking it could cross over, and the rest followed. This tells us not to put our faith in false prophets.

3. Sheep are very social. They remain calm when they can see other sheep, and they get agitated when they become separated from the flock. This means that not only must we keep sight of Jesus at all times, but also that sticking together—being in one another's company, sharing our burdens, sharing our lives—greatly reduces stress.

4. Sheep are very docile and in fact were one of the earliest animals in human history to be domesticated. In all likelihood they could not survive in the wild. This tells that we are to be obedient and completely trust God. It also tells us that, without Jesus as our shepherd, we probably wouldn't last long.

Have good cheer, little flock! For the Father / will keep you / in his love / forever.

Amen.