

"Do not be afraid." Those comforting, reassuring words run throughout the Bible. Angels say them to Zechariah when foretelling the birth of John the Baptist, to Mary when giving her the news she will bear the Savior of the world, and to the shepherds when announcing Jesus' birth. Jesus tells Simon Peter not to be afraid when he calls Peter to discipleship, and says the same thing to Jairus, the father of a young girl whom Jesus is about to heal. He uses these words to reassure the disciples any number of times, including in today's gospel reading. "Do not be afraid, little flock," he says, tenderly and lovingly, "for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

"Do not be afraid." Jesus' words in today's reading are more fully understood, I think, if heard in the context of the passage that comes right before it. Let me read that to you:

Jesus said to his disciples, "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well."

"Do not worry about your life." In other words, live in the present. That is hard for many of us. I myself come from a proud tradition of women who constantly worried--I call them "Worrier Queens." They worried about the past, which they couldn't change. They worried about the future, which they couldn't control. In seeking security and stability and predictability in the seemingly threatening, haphazard, random world we live in, we try to control our circumstances and the people around us, and we worry when we can't. We don't want to accept that the only thing we can control is our own actions, and only in the present.

It's not that there aren't plenty of things to be afraid of, to worry about: terrorism, war, global warming, unemployment, poverty, disease, death. And if we weren't afraid before, we are certainly encouraged by the media, our culture, even our politicians to be afraid now. Yet Jesus' words offer us the reassurance that what we see is not all that is. They remind us that our fears do not need to define our lives. After all, God is our loving Father, who pays attention to ravens, sparrows, and lilies, who numbers the hairs on our heads, whose good pleasure it is to give us the kingdom, a treasure that is imperishable. So we can trust in God and God's care for us.

You see, letting go of our fears, living in the present, and trusting in God enables us to be prepared for the appearance of God's kingdom. Jesus says that we *do* need to stay ready and alert for the advent of that kingdom. He tells us, "Be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks." Those servants who are waiting for their master are intentional about it. They trust that he will indeed return; they keep their lamps lit; they watch through the window and listen for his knock at the door. We, too, can do this; we, too, can be intentional in our waiting for God's kingdom, when we set aside our anxieties and worries and fears, and focus entirely on God. In Paul Showers' children's book *The Listening Walk*, a young girl enjoys taking walks with her father and their old dog, Major, who does not walk very fast. "On a Listening Walk I do not talk," the girl says. "I listen to all the different sounds. I hear many different sounds when I do not talk." At the end she tells us, "You do not even have to take a walk to hear sounds. There are sounds everywhere all the time. All you have to do is keep still and listen to them."

When we keep still--when we "still" those interior and exterior voices that make us worried and anxious and fearful--when we are still we are finally able to listen for God. And when we greet God upon his arrival, guess what happens? God doesn't demand that *we* serve *him*. On the contrary. God blesses us with a banquet. He "fastens his belt," puts on an apron, invites us sit down to eat, and comes and serves us. And what does he serve us? He serves us his kingdom. For God indeed delights in giving us God's kingdom.

You see, the master's arrival, the arrival of God's kingdom, isn't only about when it happens in the future--that heavenly hope of being raised with and in Christ after we die. God's kingdom is also present with us now. Although not yet in its fulfillment, God's kingdom has already arrived, and we have glimpses of it in so many places. The kingdom is found in the call of a loon as it makes its way over a lake; in the flash of the wings of a monarch butterfly; in the soaring notes of a Bach cantata; in the splashing of giggling toddlers in a wading pool; in the brushstrokes of a Monet painting; in the spontaneous hug of a loved one. The kingdom is also found in the dark spaces of our lives, where fear and sadness intersect with love and hope--hospital rooms where the sick find healing, soup kitchens where the hungry are fed, humane prisons where inmates find redemption--and yes, even deathbeds where the dying and the grieving are held in the loving arms of our savior Christ, whose own death and resurrection have shown us that when we die, life changes but does not end.

Worrying about the past, the present, or the future, living in fear and anxiety, and not trusting in God all prevent us from seeing the presence of God's kingdom, both in the goodness of today and in the promise of the resurrected life yet to come. So be still. Listen for God. Do not be afraid. If you need help in this, I offer you this prayer from the Celtic Christian tradition. I say it often at home, and it is the prayer our Vestry says at the conclusion of every Vestry meeting:

Calm me, O Lord, as you stilled the storm.
Still me, O Lord, keep me from harm.
Let all the tumult within me cease.
Enfold me, Lord, in your peace.