

I spent last week as chaplain at camp, which has long been my favorite place. The best part of the week was seeing so many campers, including some of our youth from this congregation, enjoy the same experience that was so formative for me. A close second best part of the week was seeing young adult staff and volunteers, some of whom I've known for several years, who have matured in their faith, leadership skills, and confidence. One of those volunteers is, right now, traveling across several states for a new job in his chosen career field. At the end of the week, as he was getting ready to leave, two of us who are not moving across the country told him how sad we were that he wouldn't be close by anymore but how excited we were for his new adventure. He said, "I'm excited, too. I'm *terrified*, but I'm excited." And I told him it's OK to be terrified sometimes. We probably should do some things that terrify us. He was about to get in the car to go, so it wasn't the time for a deep theological discussion, but I'd like to think that part of the reason he feels like he can do terrifying things is that he's spent years hearing and sharing the message of Luke's gospel today: *Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.*

Fear is a funny thing. I talked about that with some of the campers this week: fear can be a helpful, even necessary survival tool for us. A racing heart, pumping blood, and flood of adrenaline once helped us outrun saber tooth tigers and still helps us cope with very real threats to our lives and wellbeing. When Jesus calls his followers "little flock" we can imagine those threats as all the potential dangers that would face sheep: getting lost or separated from the flock; getting stuck somewhere without adequate food or water; becoming an easy target for predators. These are all dangerous, scary possibilities. Yet all throughout scripture, people are instructed, *Do not be afraid*...nearly always when something frightening is happening. Here Jesus says it just before instructing his disciples to sell their possessions in order to give to the poor. Whether it is Jesus' instruction to the metaphorical flock or the angel Gabrielle's invitation of a miraculous yet socially, emotionally, and physically dangerous pregnancy for Mary, we keep hearing God and God's messengers say *Do not be afraid*.

What is interesting, though, is that they do not tell us that there's nothing to fear or that nothing scary will ever happen to us. If you've ever sat down with a calculator and the bank statement to see if the paycheck coming in was going to balance the bills going out, you know what an audacious instruction Jesus is giving when he tells us to sell our possessions and give alms, and to not be afraid of doing it. Of course it is frightening to change a whole world view

and invest in what can't be seen instead of what is practical and right in front of us. Yet it's not that Jesus doesn't have a proper appreciation for how frightening life can be; that God fully experienced humanity, including human fear, was kind of the point of the incarnation. The reason Jesus can tell us to have no fear is not because the thing he's telling us to do isn't scary; it's because the one who is telling us to do it is unfailingly faithful. *Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.* We are not called into challenging, even terrifying circumstances on our own. We can do the scary things *because of* the One who calls us to do them.

God's call to fearless following goes all the way back to Genesis, to Abraham the patriarch, father of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. God called Abraham out of his homeland, away from his family, with the promise of an heir and a new land. Abraham lived long, nomadic years in what was, at that time, not a permanent home but still just a promised land, and he remained childless well into his old age. If you know Abraham's story, you know that he worried whether God would fulfill God's promises, and he and Sarah frequently made a mess of things as they tried to force fate and find ways to settle for less than what God had promised. But God takes Abraham outside to count the stars: *So shall your descendants be.* That's not just a fulfilled promise, that's a promise fulfilled beyond measure. This week happened to give us several good star-gazing nights at camp—so clear the senior high campers spent hours in the field watching and photographing the stars. We talked about the new images from the James Webb telescope—incredible displays that show us that not only couldn't Abraham count all the stars, Abraham couldn't even *see* all the stars. That is the abundantly faithful Father whose good pleasure it is to give us the kingdom.

Our reading from Hebrews recounts Abraham's story, including the fulfillment of God's promise, descendants for Abraham, and notes that Abraham *considered the one who had promised to be faithful.* God didn't fulfill the promise to Abraham because Abraham was faithful; God fulfilled that promise because God is faithful. The reason we can trust in the Lord, the reason we can follow without fear has nothing to do with us and everything to do with God. We're not the faithful ones; God is. We're not the ones who have to figure it all out; God is taking care of that. We can follow without fear—no matter how daunting the task—because the one who is leading us is *pleased* to help us live into the kingdom. Thanks be to the God whose faithfulness becomes our courage and whose abundant goodness overflows beyond what we could ever count.