

Epiphany 5C 2019, Luke 5:1-11, February 10, 2019, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

We have lots of different reasons for reading the Bible. One important reason many people think is to discover the rules for daily living. Call these commands. Do you know what the most common command in the whole Bible is? Tom Wright, bible scholar and a bishop in the Church of England, must have done some research on this because he tells us in one of his commentaries. Do you have any idea what it is?

The most common command in the Bible is “Do not be afraid.” Fear not. Do not fear. Do not be afraid.

Interesting, isn't it? You probably thought it was something like “Do not kill,” or “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

We must be a fearful lot, us human beings, that God would need to be so insistent that we not be afraid every time he shows up.

Isaiah sees the heavenly glory of God, angels and seraphim flying all over the place, calling out “holy, holy, holy.” And he shrinks in quivering fear, “Woe is me! I am lost, a man of unclean lips!”

Peter, supposedly an expert fisherman, takes instruction from a land-lubber carpenter's son on how to catch fish, and when the net's about to break from so big a catch, Peter cries out “Go away from me for I am a sinful man!”

To encounter God confronts us with the reality of ourselves. And the reality of the world we live in. The world can be and is a fearful place.

The supervisor comes to you and says, “there's going to be some layoffs next month. I'm sorry but we've got to cut expenses.” The doctor's grim face betrays bad news; a diagnosis of a disease in your child. Your spouse says they don't love you anymore and want to start a new life. Your retirement fund drops 40%, the company eliminates health care for those on a pension. The nightly news is filled with stories of an unsettled and increasingly hostile world.

Yes, there seems to be plenty to fear. And to us, to the world, God says, “Do not be afraid.” It's the most common command gives us. Do not fear.

Why? Why should we not fear when it feels like the world is such a threatening and fearful place?

Because we have what the world needs. The good news that is ours is precisely what the world most desperately needs. Who is the “we” of which I am speaking, and the “what” to which I refer? And what are the “needs” which it addresses?

Paul, the author of our second reading, tells us what this good news is; the “what” to which I refer. “I handed on to you...what I in turn received: that Christ died for our sins...was buried, and was raised on the third day.”

The “we” is us. The church. The community of those who, like the Corinthians, received the message of Jesus Christ, crucified and died for our sins and is now risen from the grave.

This message is what the world needs. And we are the ones who are entrusted with it. Not to keep to ourselves. But to share in any way we can.

But where do we begin? How do we share this good news with a fearful world?

I believe we do so by first listening to God and obeying that most common command, “do not be afraid.” We live first and foremost by example, by not being afraid in the face of all the threatening and frightening events and circumstances that are out there.

When the unexpected news of life-threatening illness comes our way we need not fear. We believe Jesus is risen from the dead and in him death is defeated.

When the economy goes south and we lose our possessions we need not fear. The one who lives promises that even the hairs on our head are numbered and he will bring us into that future he promises.

When politics turns ugly and hatred seems to fill the airwaves we must remember that hatred is merely the other side of the coin of fear because people hate that which they fear. We need not fear anything because perfect love casts out fear, and the One who is Love Incarnate lives, who has defeated all hatred and fear with his life.

At this point I need to distinguish fear from other emotions. Fear is different than say, grief. Grief is very real when we’ve lost a loved one or lose something else very important to us. Death is still very much a part of the world in which we live. It’s natural, even for Christians, to grieve when someone we love very much dies. Grief does not negate faith, nor is the presence of grief a denial of our trust in the promises of God.

The same can be said for fear of an economic downturn. Saying we should not fear the future of our material well-being does not mean we shouldn’t plan for our future needs. A savings account or retirement account is not a denial of faith or negate our trust in the One who promises to take care of us.

But what we have, which the world needs, is the active, living trust in Christ; who died for our sins, rose from death on the third day, who lives even now. The Christian community is the one group of people in this world who lives with an eye beyond the wall of death. The world sees that wall and lives in fear. But in Jesus Christ we glimpse the other side and we see that we have nothing to fear.

Do not be afraid. We have the what the world needs. Amen.