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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Luke 12:32-40

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes... (Luke 12:37)

Last Sunday we gave some attention to the Old Testament book of *Ecclesiastes* and its theme that human life is fragile, vulnerable, and not easily mastered — not even by the most careful following of the dictates of human wisdom. The race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor does an apple a day always keep the doctor away. And therefore it is prudent to add the Tanzanian ending to our plans: “Tomorrow I will do such-and-such *if God wishes*.”

Let me refer again to that *Ecclesiastes* passage I quoted last Sunday about the race not always going to the swift, nor the battle to the strong. The conclusion of that passage includes these troubling words:

... no one can anticipate the time of disaster. Like fish taken in a cruel net, and like birds caught in a snare, so mortals are snared at a time of calamity, when it suddenly falls upon them. (Ecclesiastes 9:12, NRS)

Now, it so happens that this passage is preceded by a lovely passage encouraging people to be happy. Here is that passage:

⁷Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart¹; for God now

¹ For the sake of the young, including those soon off to college, I feel it is necessary to point out that the text invites us to drink thy wine “with a merry heart,” but that that is a

accepteth thy works. ⁸Let thy garments be always white; and let thy head lack no ointment. ⁹Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity, which he hath given thee under the sun, all the days of thy vanity: for that is thy portion in this life, and in thy labour which thou takest under the sun. ¹⁰Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might...(Ecclesiastes 9:7-10, KJV)

In general, this is a happy passage. But even here, the writer can hardly escape his sense of dread about the vanity and the vulnerability of life. In fact, the logic of his preaching seems to be, “Live well and happily while you can for at any moment calamity might befall you.”

Now, that is not awful advice. It teaches us not to squander the time granted to us, nor to delay turning to a good life, for tomorrow is promised to no one. Do not waste these days. Do not fritter them away. Death might come tomorrow, so live fully today.

But you were meant for something better than that. Why, you are meant for the consolations of the Gospel: for hope that outpaces these seventy years and which will not fail you; for God resting his loving hand on your shoulder and urging you out into an extraordinary life, even into saintliness, like

very different thing from drinking thy wine all the way to misery.

an eagle nudging her little one out of the nest to soar in this world. You are meant for the consolations of the Gospel, I say, including life in the Church where Jesus invites you to:

“Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”(Luke 12:32, from this morning’s Gospel Lesson)

In this morning’s worship folder, in my introductory notes, I mention the story about Martin Luther, about how he would like to be found if he knew that Jesus would be coming again that afternoon. Luther’s answer, as I remember it, is that he would like to found working in his garden, because that is what he planned to be doing in any case and because it is honorable work.

Notice that Luther does not say that he would love to be found on his knees lost in prayer, nor even that he would love to be found in faith. This is perhaps a subtle point, but an important one. Of course Luther would want to be found in faith when Jesus comes again, yet Luther wants a walking, talking, working kind of faith. He is not interested in faith as a bare intellectual belief. No, Luther wants that kind of faith that strengthens him for good work in this world. Luther wants that faith that frees him from worry about his fate, so that he can entrust that to Jesus, who is the Master of that matter, and turn to the matters which have been entrusted to Luther: like working in the garden, eating your bread with joy, drinking your wine with a merry heart, loving your wife with all your heart, loving your husband so, and in general, whatever good things your hands find to do, to them with all your might. That is, Luther wanted to be found with the kind of faith that takes form in the life of love. Even if that love take the humble form of working in his garden, that’s good enough for Luther. Jesus is coming again, any day now, and Luther is content to be found in the garden.

The reason I mention this matter of Luther and the garden is because today’s Bible readings contain magnificent discussions of faith, especially of the faith of Abraham and other giants of faith, yet it is important for us to see that the kind of faith the Bible is praising is a faith that changes the world for us. Biblical faith is not a mere idea about Jesus or about the Holy Trinity, but more along the lines of a life ordered to God’s Word. That is, Biblical faith is life lived as if the promises of God are true.

Luther believed that Jesus is his Saviour, just as the Bible said. And *therefore* he did not hunker down in fear at the Second Coming of Christ, but rather worked in his garden, glad to be found that way when Jesus comes again. That is faith: living your life as if the promises of God are true. Enjoying those promises — that is faith. Meeting head on the glare and insults of sin, death, and the devil, and answering “Nonetheless, I belong to Jesus and he to me” — that is Biblical faith.

This past Wednesday’s appointed Bible readings included the story of the Israelites on the verge of the Promised Land. It is an interesting story because it illustrates so well be the difference between Abraham’s vigorous kind of faith and the weak kind of faith of the Israelites at this particular stage of their walk with God.

The story can be found in Numbers, Chapters Thirteen and Fourteen. The Lord has commanded Moses to send twelve leaders of the people across the Jordan River to spy out the Promised Land. The spies return with the report that it is true that the land is “flowing with mild and honey.” That’s good. The problem is that the land is also filled with strong people and fortified cities. In fact, the spies report that there are giants in that land:

And there we saw the giants, the sons of Anak, which come of the giants: and we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we

were in their sight.(Number 13:33, KJV)

Thus, the hearts of the spies and of the people quaked with fear.

The Lord had led them safely through the Red Sea, out of bondage in Egypt, but now the people doubt whether he can lead them safely through the giants they heartell inhabit the Promised Land. The swords of the Egyptians flashing in the sun and the hard-charging horses and chariots of Pharaoh's army had done them no harm, but they imagine now that the forces arrayed against them in the Promised Land will do them harm. They had seen wonders under the Lord's protection, but seem to doubt now whether he will provide wonders in the Promised Land. In fact, they do not speak of God at all. They simply speak of practical albeit relevant matters, like strong peoples, strong cities, and good crops. None of the spies, nor the ordinary citizens encourage the people by saying, "Ahh, but remember the wonders our God performed for us in the past. Surely we can march forward with such a great God at our side."

My point about Biblical faith is this: This fainthearted faith of the Israelites infuriates the Lord. Their hesitancy to go forward into the destiny the Lord has promised them just about drives him to distraction. Our Wednesday reading rather hopped around in Chapters Thirteen and Fourteen of Numbers, and in the process left out the passage where the Lord has resolved to slay the whole people there in the desert. Only the intercessory prayer and arguments of Moses spare the people from destruction. As it is, the Lord is still clearly frustrated with the Israelites and resolves that none of that generation will reach the Promised Land except for Caleb and Joshua — men of a different spirit from the rest. So, by and large, that fainthearted generation dies in the wilderness. Only their children actually inherit the Promised Land.

Abraham's faith was of a sturdier stuff. The New Testament book of *Hebrews* expresses that matter well:

By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went.(Hebrews 11:8, KJV)

He "went out." Not knowing whither he went, he went out. He lived as if the promises of God were true. With the manner of his life he affirmed the truth of God's Word. He did not undo with his life the Gospel he said he believed.

So, that is Father Abraham. Let me close by speaking of you and me. There are giants out there opposing your Christian life and faith. There are giants — veritable children of Anak! — who will make it hard for you to have walking, talking, working faith. You are thought to be old-fashioned, you are thought to be out of touch, you might even be thought to be mean because you happened to cling to a traditional Christian image of what is good and lovely in a human life.

I do not say it is easy to be a Christian in the modern world. I am just saying this: Among the giants out there, there is one who is on *your* side, and he is coming again, soon! I speak of your Saviour, Jesus Christ. If ever a champion contended with giants, it is Jesus, for he contended with sin, death, and the Devil, and he won. He is the Giant on the horizon. He is the King soon to come again. And blessed is that one who is found faithful when Jesus comes again. Amen! Even so, come Lord Jesus. Amen.