August 11, 2019
Proper 14C, Lectionary 19C
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_In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen._

_In our Gospel reading this morning Jesus says:_

_Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom._ (Luke 12:32, NRSV)

Jesus is speaking to us! There is much in this world to frighten us — illness, accidents, old age, uncertain world economy, shaky finances, crime, terrorism, worry for our children and future generations...much to frighten us! But in face of it all, Jesus gently says, “Do not be afraid, little flock.”

Many of you have heard by now about the threat that was made against your beloved pastor this past week. Pastor Fryer and I have been safely away in Indianapolis most of the week at the NALC convocation. In the meantime, Immanuel’s leaders and staff have been dealing with this issue and have done everything possible, with the help of the Police and the FBI and security people, to ensure our safety and the safety of the congregation here at worship. We do not want you to be alarmed! Still, we all know what kind of world we live in. We are all very aware of the recent events in Dayton, Ohio and El Paso, Texas. And so, of course, we have reason to be afraid. But again, Jesus says,

_Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom._

Jesus says this to all those who follow him for he is fully aware that there is reason for fear in this world! There was reason to fear in his day, and there is reason for fear today.

Our Lord Jesus knew full well where his life was headed. He knew that he had enemies who were seeking to destroy him. He also knew that his disciples would face opposition and danger too. And yet he says to them, “Have no fear!” Whatever dangers they faced and whatever dangers we face are not too much for Jesus – they are not too much for our Father in heaven. The troubles of this world caused by sin, by wickedness, by anger, by evildoers, by
resentment, hatred, prejudice, violence, terrorism – whatever they may be caused by – are nothing to Jesus for he has overcome them all through his death on the cross. In rising again Jesus has ultimately triumphed over death and established his kingdom forever and ever! Jesus looks at all the threats against us and says, “I am stronger than they are. I mean to defeat them, so that life will turn out well for you.” And so Jesus says to us today and everyday:

Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

Our Father in heaven means to give us the kingdom – the kingdom of His Son who reigns in glory at His right hand. This is the desire of God’s heart! It is a desire that goes all the way back to creation! God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit created us so that we might live together with our Lord in his kingdom. It is our proper home; it is where we belong; it is the goal of the Christian life.

This desire of God for humanity to populate His kingdom lies behind the promise the Lord makes to Abram saying, “I will make of you a great nation…” In the 13th chapter of the book of Genesis, God says to Abram after he had settled in the land of Canaan:

Raise your eyes now, and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; 15 for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. 16 I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth; so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted. (Genesis 13:14-16)

In today’s reading, from chapter 15, we find Abram wondering what has happened to the Lord’s promise? Where are the offspring that God promised would be so numerous? Instead, Abram complains to the Lord, that his slave’s son, a man named Eliezer of Damascus, is his only heir. Things have not turned out as Abram had expected or hoped!

Many of us could say the same thing, couldn’t we? I mean, perhaps our lives have turned out better than we had reason to hope or expect, at least in some way or other. But in other ways we may have been disappointed at the way things have turned out.

For example, when two people get married they fully expect that their marriage will last until, as the vows say, “we are parted by death.” However,
as we know too well, it doesn’t always work out that way, for whatever reason, and the marriage comes to an end.

When we were young we might have had hopes and dreams of doing something remarkable and important – of making a significant difference in this world. And surely we do make a difference, all of us do, but it may be in a smaller way than we had once hoped. And sometimes the circumstances of our life are such that we find ourselves simply doing the best we can to keep body and soul together.

Recently, I was moved by the writing of Ann Tyler, a novelist who writes about ordinary people living in the Baltimore area. One novel, entitled *Breathing Lessons*, is simply about a day in the life of a middle-aged couple, Ira and Maggie. When he was young, Ira had dreams of going to medical school and becoming a doctor. He had even been accepted to the University of Maryland and had paid his deposit. But then his father needed his help in the family picture framing shop. Also his two sisters, both struggling with mental health issues, depended upon him. And then he fell in love with Maggie and they got married. Children soon came along and before Ira knew it the years had gone by and he was running the frame shop and supporting his family – including his father and two sisters. At one point Ira thinks to himself,

> “Ah, God, I have been trapped with these people all my life and I am never going to be free.”

And he felt like a complete failure.

At the end of that day, with all its ups and downs; disappointments and frustrations, we read this about Ira:

> [Ira] was just as sad as Maggie was, and for the same reasons. He was lonely and tired and lacking in hope and his son had not turned out well and his daughter didn’t think much of him, and he still couldn’t figure out where he had gone wrong.

But then there is a moment of beautiful clarity when, as he continues to reflect on his life and his family, Ira comes to a wonderful realization. The author writes:

> [Ira] had known then what true waste was; Lord, yes. It was not his having to support these people but his failure to notice how he loved them. He loved even his worn-down, defeated father,
even the memory of his poor mother who had always been so pretty and never realized it...

He noticed how he loved them! In that moment of clarity Ira saw that his life was truly about loving those whom God had given him. In Christ-like fashion, Ira poured out his life for others. Just so, he found the true purpose of his life.

Life doesn’t always turn out the way we expect or hope, does it? Perhaps that is because our expectations and our hopes are not what they ought to be! Perhaps we set our sights too low! For what God has in store for us is so much more wonderful than we can ever imagine! Even the Kingdom of Jesus Christ our Lord.

In the midst of Abram’s disappointment and dashed hopes, the Lord takes him outside to see the stars. It must have been nighttime. The Lord says:

“Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your descendents be.”

Have you ever seen the stars as Abram must have seen them? This is hard to do in Manhattan because there is so much light. But I will never forget seeing the stars a few years back as I was approaching the top of Mt. Kilimanjaro in Africa. It was wondrous! I could see so many stars that I could not count them all. If you have been in the countryside and seen the stars this way you know what I am talking about. It can take your breath away! God’s promise to Abraham is awesome and overwhelming! It is beyond his ability to imagine a family so large, so numerous, so vast!

However, it is not beyond the Lord our God to, not only imagine, but to actually create and see, and to love! So the Psalmist writes:

13 The LORD looks down from heaven,*  
    and beholds all the people in the world.  
14 From where he sits enthroned he turns his gaze*  
    on all who dwell on the earth.  
15 He fashions all the hearts of them*  
    and understands all their works.  
18 Behold, the eye of the LORD is upon those who fear him,*  
    on those who wait upon his love,  
19 to pluck their lives from death,*  
    and to feed them in time of famine.
This is our heavenly Father, who means to give us the kingdom!

As we know, Abraham and Sarah finally do have a son, Isaac by name. By then they are quite elderly. And so Abram only sees the very beginning – the foretaste we could say – of the fulfillment of God’s promise to make of him a great nation – a fulfillment that you and I can begin to see today in the church spread throughout the world. Still, it is just a beginning! For God is not done with us yet!

Life may indeed not turn out the way we expect or hope, but we have good reason to believe that it will turn out better -- indeed, much better than we can ever hope or imagine precisely because we belong to Jesus, we cling to him, and we seek to follow him with all our hearts.

For the one who says:

    Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

...Is the very same one who comes to us in bread and wine, giving us his own body and blood – the foretaste of the feast that is to come – reassuring us that we can always count on him, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.