

“Looking Forward”

November 13, 2011

Scripture: I Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30

Fear has a way of paralyzing us. Have you ever been in a situation where the outcome was uncertain, and you just didn't know what to do next? I get the feeling sometimes that behind all the posturing and bravado we see from members of Congress over the budget and taxes that the real force at work is fear. Fear for the future of the country, maybe, but more than that fear for their futures in office. I know that sounds pretty cynical, but it seems like most of our leaders are looking back over their shoulders more than they're looking forward these days.

But looking forward can be hard to do sometimes. In our country poverty is on the rise, income inequality is growing, and unemployment is barely moving. Meanwhile, there is turmoil in Egypt and Libya, civil war in Syria, famine and starvation in Somalia; the European Union is coming apart at the seams with the economies of Greece and Italy on the brink of collapse. Not to mention the ongoing reality of some two billion people living on less than two dollars a day, and just yesterday the Men's Fellowship learned that something like a fifth of the world's population has no access to clean drinking water.

The world is a scary place right now. Fear is paralyzing our leaders and threatening to abolish hope. Which is exactly what fear does wherever and whenever it rises. Fear chokes off hope.

It's the oldest story we know. It reaches to the primordial garden when the two human creatures hid from their Maker; to the sadness of Abraham and Sarah when they feared they had no future; to the Israelites, carried into exile in Babylon sitting by the waters weeping for home. And without hope people start doing some crazy things. They persecute minorities or they invade countries, they give in to their darker natures and let hate direct their actions. Without hope a people loses its capacity to look forward, to envision a future.

I suspect that's what concerned Paul when he heard from the folks in Thessaloniki that they were fearful for their friends who had died. What would become of them when Jesus returns? The section we heard is actually the end of his comments; they begin with the words: “But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you do not grieve as others do who have no hope.” Paul replaces fear with hope. And hope motivates them to look forward. They look forward, not just to the ‘day of the Lord,’ but to the life they've been called to lead as children of the light in a world of darkness. No matter what the darkness might hide, they have nothing to fear. It reminds me of Psalm 139 where it says, “If I say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,’ even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.”

Paul reminds them their fears have already been resolved in Christ. They have nothing to fear; not for those who have already died, and not, what was probably their deeper concern, for themselves. As he points out to them, they have everything they need to equip them no matter

what lies ahead. They have the “breastplate” of faith and love and the “helmet” of salvation. So they can look forward with confidence, their hope sustained in Christ.

When a community is under siege, whether from actual enemies or from circumstances, it can be hard to see what’s available, to appreciate its own abundance. This little story Jesus tells is really about fear and hope. A master goes away for a long time, leaving three of his slaves to manage things without him. He gives each of them something to work with: five talents to the first, two to the second and one to the third. It sounds like a pretty unequal distribution, and it gets even more unequal at the end when the one with the most is given everything that had been given to the one with the least. That doesn’t seem fair at all, does it?

But this isn’t a story about fairness. This is a story about fear and hope. The first two slaves act out of hope, they take what they’re given, and looking forward, do great things with it, doubling the master’s wealth. But the third acts out of fear. He takes what he’s given and hides it away, sits on it, until the master’s return. He’s not devoted to the master, he’s not being prudent, he’s only afraid. Now, we might think that it’s not such a big deal; he only had one talent anyway, so what difference does it make. But the amount isn’t the issue, and this is why: in Jesus’ day, a worker earned one denarius a day. One talent was worth about 6,000 denarii. One talent, then, represented about 20 years’ worth of work. The amounts of money in this story are so huge they lose all meaning. If the master’s confidence is measured by the amount entrusted to each slave, then he must have had immense confidence even in the third slave.

But the third slave was afraid to use what he’d been given. He did worse than squander it; he treated it like it was nothing. If he had risked it in some way, lost it all on the ponies, at least that would have been something; it would have shown he appreciated what it was. But he was completely paralyzed by fear. And the master wasn’t about to reward that.

When we’re faced with circumstances that threaten to undo us, whether it’s a poor economy or political uncertainty or a budget deficit, the worst thing we can do is hide everything away, sit on our hands looking over our shoulders out of fear, and do nothing. That is no way to treat what God has given us. When you look around this room you can see that God has given us an abundance we can barely imagine. It is all around us. There is no darkness here. God has immense confidence in us, otherwise why would we be entrusted with all this. So look forward. Be filled with hope, because there is much to do before the Master returns, and God hasn’t finished with us yet.

Amen