9th Sunday after Pentecost – August 10, 2025 Pastor Chris Repp
Luke 12:32-40, Genesis 15:1-6 Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, Illinois

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.
"Do not be afraid, little flock," says Jesus to his disciples, "for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." "Do not be afraid." There is a rule I learned in my training as a historian, and that was that if there was a law against something, like, let's say, bribery, then you could be fairly confident that the thing that was being outlawed was happening. And not only happening, but that it had become a particular problem in the time and place it was outlawed. Now Jesus is not writing laws here, but the same principle applies. He is not telling the disciples out of the blue, "do not be afraid," just in case they might be tempted to be afraid. He tells them "do not be afraid" because his teachings are kind of alarming and his disciples are showing discomfort with them. I think these words of Jesus are just as relevant to us today as they were when they were first spoken. So let's dig in to this reading and its context to see what it might have to say to us.

Of all the Gospels, Luke more than any of the others stresses this theme of calming our fears. It starts early, in the first two chapters in those stories we get at Advent and Christmas. Every time an angel appears, the first thing it says is "do not be afraid," or "fear not" in the old King James Version. Today's Gospel reading, though, is the last time "do not be afraid" is said in Luke, and this time its meaning is a little different. All of the other times happen when someone is troubled by a particular acute event. I've already mentioned the angels. Other times include Jesus reassuring Peter after a miraculous catch of fish, and a man fearing for his daughter's life. But something different is going on here in chapter 12. Three times in this chapter Jesus tells his disciples not to be afraid, and each time he is addressing a more chronic and existential fear. In the first of these he says "do not fear those who kill the body, and after that can do nothing more," a clear allusion to the Romans and the constant threat of violence they used to keep control of those they subjugated. The second reinforces this thought by assuring them that God will take care of them. This third and last time follows a longer section about the chronic worry that is a part of normal life; how you will support yourself – what you will eat and what you will wear. These are not minor things. They are about survival.

And it doesn't take much effort to recognizes these concerns as our own. After all, what are people most worried about these days? Making ends meet – will there be enough? Our health and the health of those we love – what if illness comes? Our families and relationships – what if we lose the people closest to us? The world we're living in – the fear of violence, division, and uncertainty. And finally the future itself – what will happen to me, to my children and grandchildren, to our country, to our world?

The temptation is to focus our lives on these fears, to be led by fear to circle the wagons and turn inward, away from God and our neighbor. And let's be honest, we are constantly falling into that kind of temptation. Our instinct is the instinct of the man in last week's gospel, to store up provisions for ourselves. And these days we don't have to build bigger barns four our wealth. We invest in the stock market and high yield savings accounts, and our portfolios, our virtual barns, grow themselves! Such a deal! Yet here we have Jesus undermining our strategies, telling us *not* to be afraid, to sell our possessions and give the proceeds to the poor. It's so counterintuitive, and frankly, so offensive to our way of life, that we don't dare take him seriously, do we?

What we fail to notice in our alarm is the promise that accompanies these scandalous words of Jesus. And part of the reason for that is that our lectionary doesn't give us quite enough

context. Listen to Jesus' words that come immediately before our reading today. After a telling the disciples how God takes care of the birds of the air and the flowers of the field, Jesus says this: "… do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well." (Lk 12:29-31)

Jesus knows that these are difficult words, and he knows that his disciples will not be able to follow them of their own accord. Yet he says them anyway, and then continues to live these words himself. Let's remember that he is on his way to Jerusalem here, that the kingdom he is proclaiming and promising is a threat to the world as it is, and that it will be opposed tooth and nail by all the powers of this world and beyond that are built on fear and worry and despair of the future. Jesus' proclamation of God's kingdom is going to get him killed. That's what the powers do when you oppose them. But Jesus will not be deterred. He will let those powers do their worst, use every weapon in their arsenal: humiliation, derision, and cruelty, pain, torture, and finally death itself. And the powers will declare victory: "mission accomplished," "utter destruction," and will hope that their words will make it so. But their words will not make it so, and will not be the final word. They will not be the end of the story for Jesus or for his disciples – or even for those who have aided and abetted the powers, those whom he forgives as he dies. It is God's word alone that is the final word, and that word speaks Jesus back to life on Easter morning, at the hour of deepest darkness.

And the story, especially in Luke's version, does not even end there. This is only the end of Act I. There is another act to come, the book *called* the Acts of the Apostles. And in that second book, almost as long as Luke's Gospel itself, we will see how Jesus's death and resurrection have changed things for Jesus' disciples, and even for some of his enemies, most notably Saul of Tarsus who became Paul, and whose story we covered a few months back. And here is the remarkable thing. Jesus' words today "do not be afraid," words that did not sink in when they were spoken, will finally begin to bear fruit in those weak, unreliable, unfaithful and compromised disciples. Filled with the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of their Lord and of his resurrection, they will begin to lose their fear and boldly proclaim the good news of the kingdom. And not they will not only proclaim it, they will live it. They will even sell their possessions and share the proceeds among themselves and with others in need. It won't be smooth sailing for any of them. It will be a process. And there will be conflict and dissention among them. And the powers will continue to use all their weapons against them. But God's coming kingdom will find purchase in the heart and lives of many who will trust the promises of God even though they will not see the promises fulfilled in their lifetimes.

Sisters and brother in Christ, we are a part of this continuing story, and Jesus' words and Jesus' promise are for us as well. "Do not be afraid, little flock," says Jesus to you and to me, "for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." That kingdom is already here, among us now, whenever the promise is spoken and by God's grace the Holy Spirit gives us grace to trust it, to cling by faith to Jesus words, and to give ourselves away for the love of God and the sake of the world, even and especially in difficult times like these. May it be so, and may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.