



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Pentecost 9 – Proper 14 (C)

#### Don't Be Afraid

[RCL] Isaiah 1:1, 10-20; Psalm 50:1-8, 23-24; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12:32-40

Don't be afraid, little flock. There's no need to spiral, to crash out, to stress yourself over things that won't last. Instead, root yourself in what truly matters. You don't have to figure it all out on your own. Open your hands. Melt your heart. Relax your shoulders. Breathe. Lean into the voice of the Shepherd—the one who sees beyond what we can, who calls us into a grounded, enduring faith. Don't be afraid, little flock.

What a gift this message is, spoken through Scripture. It is so tempting to spiral into anxiety over the things of this world—things that may not even be worth the energy of our stress. Yet Jesus reminds us: “It is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” We are invited to wait and watch for glimpses of that kingdom, to seek it in faith. God is a generous parent who delights in drawing us into divine life.

In this scene from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. As he travels, people gather—drawn to this odd religious teacher, this magnetic figure. We enter a kind of Q & A or “Ask Me Anything” moment where someone in the crowd asks Jesus to settle a financial dispute. He wants Jesus to take his side, act as judge, declare what is fair. Jesus responds not with legal judgment but with a sermon on wealth, greed, and what really matters. Through his teaching and parables, he is clear: Greed is futile. Wealth is unimportant.

Just as a church's budget, or a family's, tells a story about its values, where we store our treasure shows where our hearts reside. If we see our material possessions as our treasure, then our hearts are anchored to this world. But Jesus invites us to set our hearts elsewhere. He calls us to seek the reign of God—glimpses of divine justice, right relationship, and true love—and to let go of the anxiety that surrounds material things.

Of course, that's easier said than done. For those responsible for feeding, clothing, and housing the disciples, managing the common purse and almsgiving, it's easy to imagine them rolling their eyes. Many of us do lie awake at night worrying about material things, anxious about money for groceries, the status of that 100th job application, the check engine light, medical debt, student loans. Jesus doesn't ignore this. He understands the weight of these concerns and sits with us in them. And still, he reminds us: if all we worry

about are material things—status, health, retirement funds, attendance on Sundays—we might miss the kingdom of God altogether, which brings light and peace.

The prophet Isaiah says as much in his rebuke of the people of Judah. He proclaims that God doesn't care about religious ceremonies, offerings, and incense if the people are unwilling to surrender to God. Isaiah does not mince his interpretation of how God might feel about this: "I have had enough! Who asked for this? It's futile, an abomination! Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them." There is no confusion here!

Like giving jewelry instead of an apology, or a car instead of a parent's presence, Isaiah reminds us that God desires something deeper: hearts cracked open, relationships righted. He says, "Cease to do evil. Learn to do good. Seek justice. Rescue the oppressed. Defend the orphan. Plead for the widow."

These, too, are heavy and daunting tasks. But they are the kind of work that fills a shallow and anxious life with depth, spirit, and hope. We will not and cannot achieve the fullness of God's reign on our own. But that's not the call. The call is to participate in God's vision—to stay rooted in faith, even when we don't understand the outcome.

It won't always make sense. We may argue with God: "It would be easier to follow you if I didn't have to worry about my job, my bills, my child's tuition." We might think we can figure it out on our own— I'll write a big check to that capital campaign, I'll volunteer at the food pantry at Thanksgiving, I'll pray before dinner, then I can go about my daily life. It's God's world, I just live in it, right?

Wrong. It's God's world, and we are called to participate in it, following God's call even when it doesn't fit into our material ambitions.

The author of Hebrews reminds us of our spiritual ancestors—people like Abraham and Sarah—who also struggled to trust in God's call, putting their faith in their material, physical world instead of God. They were promised descendants as numerous as the stars, but it wasn't happening in the way they expected. They took matters into their own hands. Still, God's promise prevailed, but in a way that required trust and openness to surprise. God didn't follow Abram and Sarai's Plan A, B, or C. God's gift was beyond the alphabet!

That's faith: the willingness to go where God leads, even when it doesn't fit into our five-year plan. Faith is messy. It doesn't make sense. It is, as Hebrews puts it, "the conviction of things not seen." It's a journey toward a city whose architect and builder is God.

This faith is why we must not worry, we must not panic. It might not make sense to us, but it doesn't need to. Because of Christ's assurance, we can open our hands, not clinging tightly to things that fade. Jesus calls

us to sell our possessions, to give alms, not out of obligation but out of freedom. He tells us to keep our lamps lit, to live with abundance, not scarcity.

Be ready, he says. The Son of Man will come at an unexpected hour. The glimmers of God will catch us by surprise. And when they come, we must be ready and willing to respond—not with fear but with faith.

So don't be afraid, little flock. Don't try to figure it all out on your own. Don't flutter around making frantic plans. Be still. Be at peace. Listen. Live the way of Christ. Light your lamps. Yearn for the knock at the door, the arrival in the night. Keep yourselves ready to do good, rooted in what truly matters. Don't be afraid, little flock.

***The Rev. Anna Sutterisch** is passionate about new ways of being and doing church and sharing the Gospel in a way that is relevant and life-changing to today's people in today's world. Rev. Anna is a proud graduate of Bexley Seabury Seminary and serves as priest in charge at St. Martin's Episcopal Church in Chagrin Falls. She lives in Cleveland with her spouse (also a parish priest), two small humans, and two cats, and loves to run, cook, and eat vegetables.*