

Nov. 15, 2009 Daniel 12:1-3; Psalm 16; Hebrews 10:11-14 [15-18] 19-25; Mark 13:1-8

Fear was the hidden message heard in a conversation between a small boy and his father. It was part of a television commercial urging parents to vaccinate their children as a prevention for childhood diseases. The television screen was completely black as the young boy, obviously in bed, called out to his father, "Dad, would you check the closet again? Are you sure there's no one under the bed?" The father kept reassuring him that nothing and no one was there. Finally, the two voices said goodnight to each other. There was a pause, and then the tiny voice pleaded, "Dad, could you leave the hall light on?" Immediately following this typical evening conversation between a parent and child, an adult voice was heard, "There are some things you should be afraid of," followed by a message on the TV screen about where to seek vaccinations for children.

We can look back and remember our own fear of the darkness when we were children. What was that thump coming from the closet? Are you sure that was just the wind rattling the windows? Our fear of the dark is not limited to childhood; it just changes directions, as we become adults. In our reading today, there is another fear, a fear of the end times. The disciples ask when it will happen and how they can know that it is happening. Jesus answers that they are to watch out so that they are not deceived, because many will come claiming to be him and claiming that the time is near. False prophets and false messiahs are those who claim to know the time and the things to look for. Then, along with the disciples, we may also wonder where we can find reassurance. The disciples looked at the temple and saw a magnificent and beautiful structure that would surely last, but the temple was destroyed and reassurances waver as fear of darkness descends.

We live in a fearful time when all creation seems threatened, so we hold on tightly to what we think we know about this world. Sometimes what we grip, what we place our hope in crumbles and is destroyed. Robert J. Lifton calls it "nuclear numbness" – a paralysis brought on by terror of the future.

It was 11:00 pm on a Thursday evening. The day had been war, so our windows were still open to let in the cool breeze, but along with the breeze came the sound of sirens followed by the whirring of a helicopter just over our apartment building in St. Paul, MN. I nervously looked out each and every window and watched the helicopter use its spotlight, searching for someone. Immediately my imagination ran wild. I thought back to the news from that night and the reports of raids of several businesses in the area that were shut down because of a possible connection to Osama bin Laden and the Al-Qaida network (it was, after all, November,

2001 – not long after 9-11). Of course that was not the reason for the helicopters – someone had stolen a vehicle in the area – I had just let fear dictate my imagination.

Over the summer of 2001, my husband and I drove from Grand Marais, MN (where we were doing campground ministry) to the hospital in Duluth, MN to be with a woman whose husband had suffered a serious fall was told that he would not make it. We did not know the family very well because they had only been camping next to us for a few days, but we knew she just needed other people to be with her. She told us what the options were that the doctors gave her husband. David got her to talk about the many happy memories that she had. She asked us to come into his room to see him. As soon as we stepped inside, she began crying, grabbing our hands, and asking us to read something comforting from the Bible and to pray with her. Well, she didn't want to wait for us to decide on what to read, so she told us that what she really needed to hear was the 23rd Psalm. We held hands around her husband, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me. . . ." The words echoed in our minds and hearts as we prayed with her and finished with the Lord's Prayer. She was still sad and a bit frightened, but she did realize that she was not alone; God had promised to be with her. She was not controlled by the fear of her imagination, but was directed by her faith.

This story in the gospel of Mark about the end and the coming of the Son can also be found, with variations, in Luke 21. In the gospel of Mark, verse 19 reads, "By your endurance, you will gain your souls (NRSV)." Or in another translation, "By standing firm, you will gain life (NIV)." As Christians, we have already seen the end – when Christ was nailed to the cross – a new kingdom was established. Comfort and love is given to us in that promise and we are witnesses to that moment, called to share it with others today. Many times in Scripture the promise that we are not alone is told to us again and again.

God spoke to Abraham in Genesis 26:24 – "Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you." Jesus spoke to the synagogue rulers concerning Jairus' daughter in Mark 5:36 – "Don't be afraid; just believe." These are only a couple of examples of places in Scripture that the promise of God's presence is given to us.

The commercial about parents needing to get their children vaccinated ended with the statement that there are things that we should fear. The newspapers and TV stations are telling us the same thing when they report on the horrible things that happen in this world – there are things that we should fear. And, we could choose to live controlled by that fear. But in our reading, Jesus did not answer the disciples and tell them when or where the end would come, but said (in the gospel of Mark) that other things would happen first; and (in the gospel of Luke) that they are to stand firm. Our hope is grounded in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It

is God leaving the hall light on for us in the darkness of our fear. The light is there; it is Jesus, and he tells us we are not alone! So then, when does Jesus come? When we gather together in his name (Matthew 18:20). When does Jesus come? When we break bread and share the cup together. When does Jesus come? When we proclaim God's Word and we continue to live the promise in this world.

One of my favorite Psalms reminds me of that promise: Psalm 27 – “The Lord is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life – of whom shall I be afraid?” We believe that God loves us and we are able to call out in the darkness, “Daddy, can you leave the hall light on?”

God answer us, “My child, the light is there. . . I promise that you have my Son.” Amen

Helpful Resources: Joyce Rupp, Robert L Lifton