

10th Sunday after Pentecost
August 8, 2004

“Living from Trust When Hopes are Not Met”

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FIRST READING: Genesis 15:1-6

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." ²But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" ³And Abram said, "You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir." ⁴But the word of the LORD came to him, "This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir." ⁵He brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be." ⁶And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.

PSALM: Psalm 33:12-22

Happy is the nation whose God | is the LORD!*
Happy the people he has chosen to | be his own!
¹³**The LORD looks | down from heaven,*
and beholds all the people | in the world.**
¹⁴From 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. R**
¹⁶There is no king that can be saved by a | mighty army;*
a strong man is not delivered by | his great strength.
¹⁷**The horse is a vain hope | for deliverance;*
for all its strength it | cannot save.**
¹⁸Behold, the eye of the LORD is upon | those who fear him,*
on those who wait up- | on his love,
¹⁹**to pluck their | lives from death,*
and to feed them in | time of famine. R**
²⁰Our soul waits | for the LORD;*
he is our help | and our shield.
²¹**Indeed, our heart rejoic- | es in him,*
for in his holy name we | put our trust.**
²²Let your lovingkindness, O LORD, | be upon us,*
as we have put our | trust in you. R

SECOND READING: Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ²Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. ³By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

⁸By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ¹¹By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. ¹²Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, "as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore."

¹³All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, ¹⁴for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

GOSPEL: Luke 12:32-40

[Jesus said:] ³²"Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. ³³Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. ³⁴For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

³⁵"Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; ³⁶be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. ³⁷Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. ³⁸If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves.

³⁹"But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁰You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

I suspect that you and I share something in common as our lives converge here in this building this morning—I live a pretty good life, and I suspect most of you do too. My own life has been pretty positive and privileged. My childhood family—well, I guess maybe it had its share of the common garden variety neuroses, but all in all it was a pretty rock solid safe and secure place for a child to grow up. I got to go to great colleges and graduate schools. I met another Lutheran singing in a choir and we've raised two daughters whom we admire greatly and love dearly, now enjoy every mother's dream of a son-in-law, and two totally cute little grandsons—Sam, 4 years old, and Ben, 19 months old—whom we get to play with most days of the week. My wife and I have had good jobs, our health has been pretty good. I inherited some money from my mother and, by investing it, have enough of a nest egg with my ELCA pension to retire a year from now. Sounds pretty good to me!

With a life like this it should be easy to have faith. In fact, if faith is the “assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen,” I don't even need faith. So far in my life my own personal hopes have pretty much come to pass, and I can look around and see right now the evidence of my hopes and dreams fulfilled. Maybe that's also true for some of you.

Of course, all that could change. Like Steve Jobs I could have a medical checkup and out of the blue learn I have cancer. Or the stock and bond markets could crash and with it my retirement. (Actually, if you've been reading the economic news this past week you could begin to wonder whether the good times are about to end.) Or terrorists could plant a bomb in a container coming into the Port of Oakland and devastate the whole bay area.

Of course, some of you have already experienced your own version of disaster and disappointment. One thing I know from having been a marriage and family therapist is that homes and families which seem to outsiders like oases of joy and contentment may be harbors for misery, depression, conflict, and violence. Families keep up appearances, but their reality may be far more fearful and grim than they let on to outsiders. That will be true for some of you who are here today. Perhaps only you know about the hidden illnesses you may be fighting, jobs lost, debts growing, loveless marriages, children now grown up or nearly so who are destroying themselves. There are drug addictions, family violence, battering, and abuse—any of which you may be enduring within the privacy of your home.

And you join those millions for whom their disappointed hopes and unmet dreams are not hidden, whose poverty or disease or oppression are evident to all who know them. I read in last Sunday's paper about Zheng Qingming, a bright promising high school student in a very poor part of rural China. He was counting on taking the annual college entrance exam that would have almost certainly provided him a college education and a ticket out of grinding poverty. But because his family was so poor, he had fallen behind in tuition payments to his high school, about \$80, which seems like nothing to us, but when you factor in the miserably low annual incomes of the peasants in his village, an amount equal to about \$12,000 here in the U.S.!! Because his family couldn't come up with the \$80 in back tuition, Qingming's school told him they would not issue him the certificate that would allow him to take the exam. So three days before the exam was to take place, he threw himself in front of a speeding locomotive.

It's easy to trust life, trust the future, trust other people, trust God when life is going well and your hopes and dreams just seem to fall into place. But what if life isn't so good, when your hopes have not been met, when life begins to feel hopeless?

One solution has been to give up on this world and this life and bank on heaven. When I was growing up, a hymn we used to sing was “I'm but a stranger here.” Its first verse runs like this:

I'm but a stranger here,
Heaven is my home.

Life's but a desert drear,
Heaven is my home.
Danger and sorrow stand
Round me on every hand;
Heaven is my fatherland,
Heaven is my home.

The last verse summed up the idea:

Therefore I murmur not,
Heaven is my home.
Whate'er my earthly lot,
Heaven is my home.
And I shall surely stand
There at my Lord's right hand.
Heaven is my fatherland.
Heaven is my home.

Although as a boy I liked the tune, which was written by Arthur Sullivan of Gilbert and Sullivan fame, I remember not being able to connect to the words of the hymn. "Danger and sorrow" certainly didn't "stand round ME on every hand," and MY life was no "desert drear." So far as MY life had gone, I didn't honestly have much to murmur about. But obviously my experience was not everyone's. The author of the hymn, Thomas Taylor, wrote those words while he was sick with an illness that led to his death two months before his 28th birthday. His way of holding on to trust as he was heading toward an early death was to transfer his hopes to a life to come beyond the grave.

That seems to be the strategy suggested by the author of the letter to the Hebrews today.

(Hebrews 11) ¹³All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, ¹⁴for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

What does it mean - "Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God"? Why would God be ashamed to be called their God? The answer is that God had made promises to them and had not delivered. "All of these died . . . without having received the promises." They were supposed to have a safe, secure homeland, but Israel was constantly under attack from its neighbors, often under siege, and even conquered and subjugated by other nations. At the time this letter was written, the Romans were occupying Palestine. A good strong god was supposed to protect and take care of you. But Israel's God seemed to be a weak and useless embarrassment. Well, then, if God could not deliver on the promise to provide his people a homeland here, how about providing one the other side of death, in heaven? Then God would no longer need to be ashamed to be called their God.

An old friend of mine who taught for many years at the University of Iowa, George Nickelsburg, is one of the country's leading authorities on intertestamental Judaism (the period between the last books of the Old Testament and the earliest books of the New). George has argued that the doctrine of resurrection—virtually unknown in the Old Testament—was developed within Judaism during the period between the Old and New Testaments, when Palestine was once again subject to a foreign conqueror. The doctrine of resurrection and a renewed life beyond

death came about, according to George, exactly to give God elbow room to fulfill the promises he had made to the people of Israel, promises to provide them with a safe, secure land to call their own. So the original function of the doctrine of resurrection was not to comfort you and me with the possibility of life beyond death, but to provide comfort to God by buying God time beyond history to fulfill his unmet promises. That is certainly the theme here in the passage from the letter to the Hebrews.

Anyway, when your hopes are not met, one of your strategies for continuing to trust is to trust that the hopes unmet in this life will be fulfilled beyond our wildest dreams in the next. That may be the only recourse you have if you are powerless to change your condition.

But there is another strategy, one I think is suggested in the Gospel reading this morning.

Jesus says, (Luke 12) ³²"Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. ³³Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. ³⁴For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Jesus also uses the language of heaven, but he doesn't stop there, as though all we can do is to wait out our miserable time patiently here on earth until in heaven we can finally cash in on God's promises. No, his message energizes and empowers people by defining a way to engage life right now. What he basically proposes is a life of non-attachment, a life that minimizes the role of material possessions as the route to happiness. In fact, he suggests that we all chill out, divest ourselves of our possessions, and invest in goodness, generosity, charity, hospitality, and peace. Live like that, he suggests, and you'll have nothing to fear. In fact, you will be tasting heaven's fulfillment right now.

Is that realistic and workable? I think it is. To begin with it allows you to enjoy whatever you have of life without the constant frustration and resentment that you don't have more. I often think about the man I knew who had inherited \$5 million from his parents. I thought that was a pretty tidy sum, enough to provide him a comfortable, even fairly luxurious life without ever holding a job ever again. But, no, he worried constantly that he would lose the whole \$5 million somehow, and he also needed more, because he wanted to be able to fly to New York whenever he wished to take in a show or a meal at a favorite restaurant and not even feel the expense. In fact, he wanted to own his own jet and worried that he really hadn't made it in life unless he could afford to buy one. He seemed to me like the rich young man that left Jesus in sorrow after Jesus had suggested divestment and discipleship to him as the path to happiness.

Luke's is the realistic one of the 4 gospels. Sometimes it's been called the gospel for the long haul, because it was written fairly late, after the early Christians realized that Jesus was not going to return in their lifetime. They came to accept the reality that they were going to need to settle in for the long haul, which meant they couldn't sell everything and move to a mountain top and wait for Jesus' arrival, as some cults in our own time have done. Instead they would have to figure out how to carry on with an ordinary life, with jobs and families, with planning and organization and structure, while still somehow living lives that reflected Jesus' teachings and values.

So here Jesus doesn't say, "Sell everything you own, give the proceeds to the poor, and come, follow me out into the wilderness." Instead he speaks of selling possessions and giving alms—giving to charity—and making heavenly purses, we might say, building a heavenly investment portfolio. In modern terms he is probably prompting us not to live for money, not for possessions, not even for health, but to use whatever we have of life not only for ourselves, but for the public good.

In a democratic society like ours I think he means investing ourselves in the political process, becoming knowledgeable about the issues and helping one another to be better informed, and then supporting candidates financially and with whatever other resources we can muster who we think will best promote a good and just society and a more equitable, safe, secure world for everyone. It means giving generously to charitable causes of all sorts, and there are endless opportunities to do so; take your pick. But it also means paying our fair share of taxes without evading what we owe or grumbling about how much we end up paying. And it means supporting legislation and ballot initiatives that support a more just, thriving, and healthy society even when we ourselves will not directly benefit from them.

It's no wonder that Jesus sometimes talks about little children as our role models for the redeemed life. I spend a lot of time with my two little grandsons, Sam and Ben. The thing I've noticed about the littlest children is how they love to give. Especially really little children under the age of two seem to be oblivious to any ideas of ownership. They love something one minute, and they'll give it up the next. They live in the moment. In safe, protective healthy families, they receive everything they need from outside themselves and they can let any of it go because they trust whatever they need will always be there. When they are cold, the adults give them more layers of clothing or blankets. When they are bored, the adults entertain them, offer them toys, read them stories. When they fall down—which seems to happen all the time—the adults pick them up and hug them and comfort them and soothe their wounds. When they are hungry, the adults around them give them food. They even feed them the food.

Little Ben, who is just over a year and a half old, is just at that stage where he loves to share his food with others. We place a bowl of blueberries before him and put one in his mouth. Ben loves blueberries, and you would think he would cling to the ones he's been given so that he can get the most for himself. But, no, he picks one after another out of his bowl and wants to feed them to us. He holds them out to us and smiles gleefully if we let him feed us the precious blueberries he loves so much. Eating is a time to share. It's just as much fun to give as to receive. Ben is playing with that and experiencing that first-hand. You can see why Jesus talks about children going first into the kingdom of heaven.

Sam used to be just like Ben when he was under two years old. But now Sam is 4. By comparison with Ben, Sam is really grown up. He has learned about possessions. He knows what belongs to him, and he guards his belongings vigilantly. It's a struggle for him to share with Ben, who doesn't yet understand about ownership and property rights, and territoriality. Sam loves to help and he loves to make things to give away. Some possessions he delights in giving to others, but he also clings to the possessions he wants for himself, and he falls into visible anguish when someone tries to wrest anything away from him. He has become more like you and me. He knows more fear, more worry, more responsibility than little Benny. He is tasting something of what it's like to be a grownup.

It's so hard to hold on to little Benny's implicit trust in life. It's hard for Sam, but it's hard for the rest of us adults who have gotten so far removed from little children like Benny and Sam. It's so hard to trust that we will have whatever we need even when hopes are unmet and dreams shattered. Yet God has promised us what we need, not everything we might want or everything we might wish for, but everything we actually need, and not just in some heavenly paradise beyond human experience, but here and now in the middle of this mixed up, confusing, sometimes terrifying world that is ours. It's the Father's "good pleasure"—it makes God happy!—to give us the kingdom now. And we live it, enjoy it, and thrive on it when we can find our happiness by sharing the blueberries.