



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

I speak to you today as a sinner to sinners, as the beloved of God to God's beloved, as one called to bear witness to those called to bear witness. Amen.

As some of you know, I've been on vacation. After spending two weeks in Costa Rica with the youth, which was not a vacation, I went on vacation with Claire to join a group of people that we knew from Canada to hike in the Alps for two weeks. And it was wonderful. And I knew I was coming back to preach this sermon, and so I did what I always do on vacation. I think about the next deadline I have at work, and then I obsess about it and start to think about it because I find this passage from Luke challenging. It happens in the midst of a lot of challenging teachings of Jesus, a lot of challenging parables. And it also has this ending point that is somewhat terrifying to me: be watchful, be aware. You do not know when Jesus is coming back.

And I don't know about you, but as I was reflecting on that part of the passage, I felt like I didn't need any more coaching in being hyper-aware. I feel like I'm being hypervigilant every single day these days. I don't know what's going to happen next in this world that we live in. When are we going to have another world war break out? When is another beloved celebrity going to die? When are we going to discover an atrocity hidden in plain sight? This world is full of things that keep us hypervigilant all the time.

But I did find in this passage incredible comfort in the words that Jesus says at the beginning: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." And I found myself ruminating about that part of the passage because Luke often speaks of fear. When Gabriel delivers to Zechariah the news that his wife, Elizabeth, is going to bear a child even though she had passed the age of childbearing, Gabriel says to Zechariah, fear not. And when Jesus is confronting a father who is driven mad because his daughter is ill and full of disease, He says to him, fear not. And when Jesus says to the disciples, don't be afraid, He's using the same exact word from the Greek: fear not.

But even more beautiful to me was the reference to the disciples as a little flock. It doesn't happen often in the scriptures that the people of God are called a flock. And here Jesus uses the diminutive, little flock. "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's will to give you the kingdom." And I find that deeply comforting because it recognizes not that we can stop being fearful. Fear is just a human

reaction that we have, an emotion that is unavoidable, but we can decide to be fearful and let fear control us, or we can live for hope.

And while I was ruminating on this passage, while I was hiking the Alps, I decided to read a book by Martha Nussbaum, a brilliant philosopher, called *Monarchy of Fear*. She published it in 2018. And she talks about all the ways politicians use fear to control us, to shrink our world. And I would add the market that we live in constantly fills us with fear of one kind or another to shrink our world. And the response to fear is to practice hope, she says. Because when we are hopeful, we experience a kind of belief that things will be better, not as we imagine them. Oftentimes when hopes are fulfilled, it is beyond what we can ask or imagine, but things will be better. And that confidence is critical in any kind of community, Nussbaum argues.

And she lists some practices for being hopeful. Happily, she says, going to church is one of those practices, becoming active in your religious community. Why? Because when you are part of a religious community, you engage in a kind of connectivity that increases your world and increases your hope. She says that the arts community, teaching children, for example, music is a way of expanding your world and filling you with hope. Protest movements, she says, are incredibly important exercises in hope. She cites Martin Luther King's beautiful speech in Washington that was incredibly hopeful in a real and palpable way, when he said that the day was coming when there would be young white children and young black children playing together in Alabama. King was expressing a kind of hopeful vision that was real and yet not realized. And finally, she says, we can engage in hope by imagining what justice demands of us and our world. We can think about the capabilities that we want to build around us so that the world we live in is not so constrained.

But the best part of the book, in my opinion, comes at the end. It's when she says that these practices all have to be grounded in three kinds of belief. We need hope, we need faith, and we need love. We need hope that things will get better. We need faith that somehow, even though we are not in control, that God is in control and God can bring about these things. And we need love. We need to have that love that leans in. In this way we can live through times that are fearful without letting our worlds collapse. We can live in and through our fears in a way that is ultimately productive by seeing ourselves in the context of something larger.

And I was so taken about this thought that she had, that I had this minor epiphany as I was walking between two mountain ranges on a peak. And I took out my smartphone and I took the picture that's on your bulletin today. It was in Bern and it was a six-and-a-half hour trip. And I don't want you to think that I enjoyed every minute of it. It was grueling, but it was that moment where I saw that vista and I

saw that path and I saw those two hills. And I thought of a line from Rainer Maria Rilke's wonderful Book of Hours that I have for you today in the bulletin on page eight.

All will come again into its strength:
the fields undivided, the waters undammed,
the trees towering and the walls built low.
And in the valleys, people as strong and varied as the land.

And no churches
where God is imprisoned and lamented
like a trapped and wounded animal.
The houses welcoming all who knock
and a sense of boundless offering in all relations,
and in you and me.

No yearning for an afterlife,
no looking beyond,
no belittling of death,
but only longing for what belongs to us
and serving earth,
lest we remain unused.

You might take issue with one part or another of Rilke's incredible vision of God, but these are hopeful words. And they speak about a kind of way of being in which we allow that vision of God to expand our world and to be hopeful and to lean on hope and faith and love. And that requires us to let go and it's hard and difficult. Now, that was my thought before coming back from vacation, and what I discovered is that when you are thinking about great thoughts and you're by yourself on a mountain in Switzerland, it's easy to get there. But starting on Sunday night, I had two visceral experiences of faith and hope and love and fear.

On Sunday night, as I was just getting myself into bed – and I'm going to be 60 this month, and so for me, getting into bed around 7:30, that's like winning. That's winning the day. It's like, yes, I'm in bed now. Fantastic – I got a call from a parishioner, Kris Guccione. And she and her husband Wally and her children, her two boys, were on Fire Island off of Long Island on vacation and out of nowhere, unexpectedly, Wally's heart stopped. He had complete cardiac arrest. And I was the second call she made after 911. And we were talking on the phone and I began praying for her.

And when I have these moments of praying for someone, I have this moment where I feel just lifted up into the air and I feel like I'm swimming in the Spirit and I see them and I see where they are. It starts to enter my mind that I start to close the distance and travel to where they are. I suddenly was there on the beach and I

was walking with her as she was getting Wally into the launch to take him to the mainland to put him on an ambulance and to get him to a hospital. And she was terrified that Wally was going to die because he hadn't taken a breath or had a heartbeat for several minutes.

And when people experience fear, they have typical reactions. They have fight, flight, freeze, or fawn. And I'm really proud of Kris because she fought, she fought for her husband and she made relationships with the officer that was taking him over to the mainland. And on Monday, when she couldn't sleep anymore, she decided to walk to the hospital to see him, even though she was staying a little bit while away. She fought. And amazingly, she was also surrounded in the midst of that fighting for his life, these instances of faith, hope and love. It wasn't that her fear disappeared, but she suddenly became aware of all these things.

On the blanket next to the family was a group of ER nurses who were on vacation and they immediately started doing CPR. And then as she's moving over, she learned the name of the person who was carrying her over, the officer. His name was George. And she immediately associated that with the father figure in her life named George. And then she discovered that Fire Island, which is a little remote island, actually had the most advanced EMT system for keeping someone alive. And then she noticed that when she got to the hospital, SUNY Hospital in Long Island was in the midst of a 10-year grant on how to keep people who had experienced cardiac arrest alive through cooling the body so that the organs didn't degrade.

And then she had hope when Wally started breathing on Monday. She had started walking in the middle of the night and she got lost. She tried to get an Uber driver, couldn't get an Uber driver, found her way to a highway, called the Uber driver again, and the Uber driver that picked her up was named Gabriel. And Wally was taken off ventilation and breathed on his own by Tuesday. By Thursday, he was discharged from the hospital with no lasting after effects.

Now this is miraculous. But for me, the real miracle for me was that hope and faith and love that surrounded her when she was stricken and full of fear. That is what I think Jesus is saying today when He says, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is the Father's will to give you the kingdom." And my week did not end on Thursday. I found another instance of fear and faith, and hope and love when I went to see Janice King, who has for the past year struggled with pancreatic cancer. She went into hospice about a year ago and without any further medical intervention except for palliative care, she's lived a year with pancreatic cancer.

And Janice King is one of the great pillars of this church. She and I like to exchange terse emails to each other of great disagreement. Janice protects the artworks of the church. She protected the docents. She at one point was doing

the altar guild. She loved to write me a very terse email. It was wonderful. And I did her the great favor of returning fire for the past 10 years. And I went to see her on Thursday, and I walked into her room and I could tell that she was getting close. And I realized I love this woman. I grabbed her hand and I kissed it, and she said, thank you. And we prayed and I anointed her.

And then on Saturday, yesterday, I woke up and again had that moment where I was leaving my feet and I called Eric Linder and I said, let's go see Jan. I went in and as soon as I saw her, I knew that we were close so I called her children. We gathered together. We did last rites, and 45 minutes later she died. Her children were terrified, but they were there. And in that moment in which they had to deal with the loss of their mother, their fear did not take the form of fight or flight or freezing or fawning. Their fear became firm. They held their own there with their mom, and you could feel the faith, hope, and love in the room.

In both instances, there was a choice to be made in the midst of fear. To choose hope or faith or love, that is the choice you and I have each day. We have a choice whether to let fear close our world down, or we have a choice to let hope and love and faith make our world larger. We have that choice today, which is why Jesus says, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's will to give you the kingdom." May we enter that kingdom together.

Amen.