

Pentecost 14C
Peace, Seattle
August 7, 2016
Luke 12:32-40

FEARLESS FOUNDATION

The plans from the Low Income Housing Institute that came with the materials for our Tiny House broke the building process down into a series of 23 steps.

And at first it seemed it would be a piece of cake! All we had to do was follow directions!

- Measure the floor joists, cut the floor joists, nail the floor joists;
- Measure the wall studs, cut the wall studs, nail the wall studs, and so on.

What could possibly go wrong?

Well, it turns out, there was an unwritten caveat: In order for the house to turn out how it was supposed to, you better know some basic rules of framing construction.

Now that knowledge, pooled between us, served us pretty well as we built the floor deck, and put up the walls. But when it came to the roof...well—that was a different matter.

So as I worked on the roof last Sunday afternoon, I became first perplexed and then flummoxed, when the plans gave conflicting directions for bracing the roof's crucial ridge beam—the central beam from which the whole roof gets its shape. By quitting time, it was all a muddle in my head.

That night, my dreams were taken over by rafter tails and gable ends. I awoke at 4:30 and couldn't get back to sleep; after an hour I gave up trying. Putting pencil to paper, I tried sorting things out in my mind. Then I headed for the patio and by 1pm, I had the roof mostly licked.

But there was still a lingering question about the length of the ridge beam's overhang: was it 6 inches or 8? The plans mentioned both. It was time to call in a higher power.

After several attempts I finally got that higher power—master carpenter Melinda Nichols—on the line. I explained the problem to her, and you know what she told me?

USE YOUR OWN JUDGMENT. The 6-inch length made the most sense to me, so I made the cut and never looked back.

When you're building a house, whether a Tiny one or a full sized one, remembering basic principles will get you a long way down the road; but not all the way. You've got to make informed choices.

When you're interpreting Scripture, basic principles will get you past some pretty complex texts. But here, too, you've got to make informed choices. Today's gospel reading is a case in point.

In telling his version of Jesus' story, Luke concentrates much of Jesus' teaching in the central chapters of his gospel, beginning with chapter 12.

These are the chapters where we find the bulk of Jesus' parables, his teaching about discipleship, his critiques of the religious establishment, and his contrasts between material and spiritual well-being.

In other words, Jesus covers a lot of territory, and in today's reading in particular he unloads a whole truckload of images and metaphors on his listeners.

First we are sheep: HAVE NO FEAR LITTLE FLOCK, says Jesus, IT IS THE FATHER'S GOOD PLEASURE TO GIVE YOU THE KINGDOM.

Then, we are stewards: SELL YOUR POSSESSIONS, GIVE ALMS, INVEST YOUR TREASURE WHERE NO THIEF CAN STEAL AND NO MOTH DESTROY.

Then we've morphed into slaves, dressed for action...BE LIKE THOSE WHO HAVE THEIR LAMPS LIT AND READY WHEN THEIR MASTER RETURNS HOME.

OK... But as we come to verse 39 things turn murky:

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. SO YOU ALSO MUST BE READY, FOR THE SON OF MAN IS COMING AT UNEXPECTED HOUR.

Now what's that supposed to mean?

At first it sounds like Jesus may be the owner; but if he's the owner, then who's the thief?

On the other hand, maybe it's Jesus who is the thief, and we are the owners...or somebody is...

What are we supposed to do with that? Is this the ridge beam or what? And if so, how far is it supposed to extend? Is Jesus trying to confuse us? Or is he using some secret design language that we haven't got a clue about?

That's when we need to reset. And, as it turns out, the reset—the primary interpretive key for our gospel reading is hidden right in plain view. In fact, these first three words show up at key points in Luke's gospel, and in Scripture as a whole. Three simple words that lead us into the mind of God and God's grand design:

HAVE NO FEAR. IT IS YOUR FATHER'S GOOD PLEASURE TO GIVE YOU THE KINGDOM.

These words at the beginning of our reading lay out God's plans for us clearly to see:

First, Jesus assures us we need not fear. IMAGINE GOD LESS LIKE A VENGEFUL JUDGE AND MORE LIKE A LOVING FATHER, he says. LET THAT BE THE IMAGE YOU HOLD IN YOUR MIND.

Second, says Jesus, God's deepest desire is to give you what you can never achieve, win, earn, or control: a treasured place in the tapestry of Kin-dom which God has been weaving together from the very beginning.

Third, knowing that this is the true nature of God, we can dare to put our trust in him; and in so doing, we find ourselves ready and equipped for every contingency that comes our way.

HAVE NO FEAR LITTLE FLOCK. IT IS YOUR FATHER'S GOOD PLEASURE TO GIVE YOU THE KINGDOM.

That's the end point, that's where all this is aiming. But like the writer of Hebrews, I think God wants us to stay eager, to keep stretching, keep looking, and keep longing for that "better country," and not to act like we've arrived already and the journey is over.

Faith is a journey full of shifting landscapes. And like that set of Tiny House building plans, not every single detail of our individual lives is spelled out.

But to be a person of faith means learning to trust that our lives, our journeys, ultimately rest in Benevolent hands; that there is an architect and builder behind it all.

This God whom we see face to face in Jesus is a God who not only wills our good but who loves each and every one of us passionately; who intends blessings—not curses—for this world; and who promises to bring history's journey, as difficult and disappointing, as varied and challenging and tragic as it is, to a grace-full and hope-filled completion.

When we were watching the Opening Ceremonies of the Olympics in Rio Friday night, I was struck by how honest the story tellers behind that presentation were when it comes to the history of Brazil and the truth about not only that nation's story but the world's story. There was no glossing over Brazil's tortured history, or the deep challenges that it faces.

At times on our journey tragedies intervene. Set backs cloud our vision. The harmony of the spheres is broken, and we begin to lose sight of that better country. We may even find ourselves wondering if that Better Country isn't all a mirage.

Brazil is going through one of those times right now—while the whole world is watching.

In times like these, we must learn the truth that God's love for us is deeper than all that is wrong with us and with this world. We lean on God's word of promise to support us—and lean on the community of faith.

Brother Martin taught us that this fundamental insight—that God can be trusted—is not something we come to on our own. It's a gift that comes to us from outside of ourselves, an insight we receive when we live in community, a hopeful word that can lead us out from under the tents of our limited worldviews and point us toward the stars.

My favorite part of the lesson from Hebrews comes just after the long list of examples in the faith life of Abraham and Sarah and their descendants. Verse 13 reads:

ALL THESE DIED IN THE FAITH WITHOUT HAVING RECEIVED THE PROMISE,
BUT FROM A DISTANCE THEY SAW AND GREETED THEM.

Some day soon we'll be done with the Tiny House, it'll be taken off our patio, and hauled to a Tiny House village where someone will call it home.

How long will this journey of faith be? How far before we reach the destination?

From a distance we look as we journey toward the Kingdom, toward the promises of God. And we trust—because that's what faith comes down to—a total, irrevocable trusting—we trust that however the landscape shapes up, whatever conditions meet us along the way, God's accompaniment with us is assured.

As we look toward the future, both our own and that of this congregation, we cannot know precisely how things will turn out. Nevertheless we move forward. For the love of God in Jesus propels us onward, and the promise of God surrounds us.

Have no fear little flock, have no fear. Amen.