

What do you fear? It's a good question. Not just to wallow in self-pity or to give us a good jolt of adrenaline. It's a good question because sometimes our greatest fears also reflect our greatest hopes. What do you fear? You see, ***hope & fear are some of the most powerful human motivators.*** Hope & fear can either bind people together or they can pull us apart. Hope & fear can inspire us to heroic sacrifice - not just getting us out of bed in the morning, but even motivating us to lay down our lives for something bigger than ourselves. They can also dehumanize us, leading us down a path of rhetoric & behavior that chips away at our humanity.

That's why every culture sells a vision of life combining elements of hope & fear. That's what cultures do. And ***Today's Gospel speaks directly to every vision of hope & fear that governs our lives.*** There's nothing wrong with a life governed by hope & fear. But the message of our faith is that it's so easy to deceive ourselves with false hopes & false fears. It's one of the fundamental dramas at the heart of Scripture. Scripture begins with a story in Genesis about Adam & Eve & a snake & a tree. It's a story about God creating humanity in love; giving humans a creative, exciting, deeply meaningful mission to be God's caretakers in the world. But our first response is to listen to ***seductive voices*** that twist our hope & create false fear.

The serpent plants a fear that God is trying to oppress us or to hold us back from our true potential. [*Did God really say...?*] And once that job is done, we humans are easy suckers for the first pretty thing we see. So Adam & Eve pick the forbidden fruit & God responds by allowing the consequence of their action to play

out. God allows them to build a life around their twisted hopes & false fears. But God doesn't abandon them. The rest of the Bible is about God pursuing us & inviting us to discover real hope & true meaning in the God who made us in love.

Once we have that story straight, then it's easy to see how today's Gospel is repeating the story of Eden all over again with Jesus & his followers. The disciples are practically mimicking the story of Adam & Eve when they marvel at the beauty of the Temple. Because *if there was one thing in ancient Israel that embodied their national hope - it was God's Temple*. The Temple was a microcosm of creation. It was the restoration of the Garden of Eden. It was the footstool of God's heavenly throne on earth. The people of Israel spent two generations rebuilding the temple, and it all started with a king who no one really liked - but he was ruthless & clever and he knew how to get things done. The Temple was one of the marvels of the ancient world. The front was even layered in gold so that when a priest or king performed a ceremony it looked like he was literally glowing from the sun. Israel's temple was the epicenter of beauty, wealth, power - and hope.

It's no wonder the followers of Jesus are impressed by the beauty of the temple. It's no wonder they marvel at the Temple almost like the first humans marveled at an enticing piece of forbidden fruit. It's no wonder they thought if they could just put Jesus in charge of that Temple then all of their hopes would come true. *That's the forbidden fruit: if we can just get the right person in charge, then maybe they'll fix it*. But Jesus will have none of it. He not only tears down their

false hope, he says the temple will be torn down too. And when it's burned to the ground, he says all kind of false messiahs (new serpents) will come slithering out of the weeds selling new visions of hope & fear. They'll line us up and invite us to follow. But his commandment is crystal clear: ***do not go after them & do not fear.***

He says, they'll entice you with beauty & promises that twist your greatest hopes. And if that doesn't work, he says: they'll stoke you greatest fear. You'll hear of wars and insurrections. But his response is just as clear. He says: ***do not go after them & do not fear.*** Nation will rise against nation. There will be earthquakes, famines, and plagues. The planet will look like it's coming undone. But his command is still the same: ***do not go after them & do not fear.***

Because our lives are already governed by our hope in God. That hope is the truth that Adam & Eve missed. That hope is what defines everything else. And ***when our hope is fixed on God, then whatever we face, becomes an opportunity to testify to the God of our faith.*** Here's the secret to Christian life. The secret is this: *We're not here to win. We're here to witness* (21.13). That's the secret. That's what immunizes us against any twisted hope. That's what protects us from every false fear. We care deeply about our political process, but we never go after them & we never fear them. Jesus even tells us not to rely on any canned rhetoric or policy platform (21.14). He says: don't rehearse any speech about being great or moving forward together. We're not following a party, we're following Jesus.

Do not go after them & do not fear. It sounds good, but how do we do it?

Following Jesus in the midst of so many contemporary serpents is not something we can just do like turning on the lights. It only happens if we start now cultivating a life of prayer & discipleship; allowing it to make us salt & light in a world that's always changing its list of winners & losers. So that whatever we face, we're never enticed by false hope or frightened by false fear. Starting *now* is the only way we'll ever witness to the God of our faith; the God of love, the God of justice, the God of peace. Starting now is the only way to protect us from false hope & false fear.

It's no mistake that Jesus shares these words at the end of Luke's Gospel. It's no mistake that he shares it here, before Jesus himself walks the way of the cross. It's no mistake that he echoes a theme woven throughout the entire narrative of Luke's Gospel about embracing real hope & rejecting false fear.

When the angel Gabriel appears to Mary, he says: *do not fear, you have found favor with God.*

When the heavenly host appear to shepherds in a field, they say: *do not fear, a real king has finally been born.*

When Jesus calls Simon, he says: *do not fear, you're gonna fish for people.*

When Jesus raises a dead girl, he tells her father: *do not fear, only believe.*

When he teaches crowds of peasants & outcasts who feel abandoned & ignored, he tells them: *do not fear, you are priceless to God.*

And we can be sure that Jesus' message for us is the same as it's always been: do not go after them, and do not fear. Wherever you fall on the political

spectrum, whether our nation is enticing you with promises of prosperity & security, or whether it's stoking your fear about enemies in our midsts; remember, we're already following Jesus. Our hope is in God. So whatever happens on Capitol Hill: we're not here to win; we're here to witness. So we can focus less on national rhetoric & focus more on what Jesus has to say.

“Do not fear, little flock, for your Father is pleased to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to the poor. [Provide yourself] ... a treasure in heaven that will not fail... For where your treasure is [where your hope is], there your heart will be also,” (Lk 12:32–34). Amen.