

In the ✠ name of Jesus. Amen.

Fear and faith are juxtaposed with each other in our texts today. The Lord said to Abram, “*Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.*” But at the end, we hear that Abram, “*believed the LORD, and [the LORD] counted [that faith] to him as righteousness.*” And then Jesus said to His disciples in our Gospel not only, “*do not be anxious,*” but also, “*fear not, little flock,*” just after He said to them, “*O you of little faith!*” But, of course, He encouraged them to place their trust in a treasure that neither fails nor is destroyed. That treasure is eternal salvation, a heavenly treasure, the kingdom of God.

“*Fear not, little flock; it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you [this treasure,] the kingdom.*” Indeed, doesn’t St. Paul say to us, “*Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth*”? Of course, there are many voices in the ether today that call for just the opposite: set your mind on the things that are on earth. For example, one such author, Karen Armstrong calls for us “*doctrine-centered Christians*” to “*be about cultivating the art of courageous, compassionate, and kenotic [that is, selfless] living in the face of life’s difficulties.*” She holds that from earliest times, Christianity was not about doctrine; it was about “*practice, the doing of religion.*”

Of course, faithful Christians “*do.*” Faithful Christians put their faith into action. Faithful Christians “*stay dressed for action*”; they “*keep [their] lamps burning*”; they remain “*awake*” as they await the master’s return.

Certainly that’s so here at Zion. Today, we will be praying for our school, an important ministry of our congregation, and later as it starts up again for our iCAN. “*Dressed for action!*” Today we’ll pray for Deaconess Pat as she prepares to head over to Uganda to serve the church there. Today, we’ll pray for the Lord’s blessing for our service to our neighbors in the Diaper Distribution. Our St. Peters/Zion Project is again active working to improve our neighborhood. Action! Love! Doing! But our doing doesn’t make us Christians.

It’s interesting that one of my cousins by marriage sent me one of those ubiquitous email missives this past week. You know them, the kind that tries to shame you into sending it along to everyone in your address book. Its message: “*ten things God won’t ask you on [the Last] Day.*” “*God won’t ask what kind of car you drove,*” it asserted. “*He’ll ask how many people you drove who didn’t have transportation.*” “*God won’t ask the square footage of your house. He’ll ask how many people you welcomed into your home.*” “*God won’t ask about the clothes you had in your closet. He’ll ask how many you helped to clothe.*” Etc. Every one of them works-centered. What does this mean? What really was its

message? In the final analysis, when everything counts on the Last Day, it is going to be your works that earn you salvation.

Some of the language was reminiscent of Matthew 25, the separation of people as sheep and goats. I fired off an email back to all of the addressees—my mother included and other cousins. I pointed them back to Matthew 25 and noted that on the Last Day “God won’t be doing the asking; He’ll be making the pronouncements. HE will separate the believers from the unbelievers as a shepherd separates sheep from the goats. HE will pronounce the judgment, blessed or cursed. HE won’t be asking but telling us what we did (feeding, giving drink, clothing, etc.) or failed to do. We’ll be doing the asking, ‘When did we do this?’”

I chastised him a bit for the false doctrine of this email, and reminded him that even as a motivation to good works, it’s all wrong, all law. The law informs us what to do, to be sure — we call that the 3rd Use of the Law — but it is not our motivation for doing as Christians.

No, we do all this because we belong to Christ, because we “*have died, and [our] life is hidden with Christ in God.*” We do all this because we “*have been raised with Christ, [and] seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God,*” and with that in mind, then, with our “*treasure*” in the right place — on “*Christ who is [our] life,*” — then “*our hearts*” likewise will be in the right place — not filled with fear over what we will eat, not worrying about what we will wear, but trusting in Christ Jesus alone — then “*[w]hen Christ ... appears, then you also will appear with him in glory,*” inheritors of His kingdom.

Doesn’t that drive away all fear? This faith? This trust in Christ? That it doesn’t depend on your works, but on God’s grace received by faith? “*[S]eek his kingdom ...*” “*Set your minds on things that are above ...*” “*Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.*”

Consider the great examples of faith — I’ll talk about those that the writer of the Hebrews talks about, but you might have in mind other saints, mother, father, grandparent, etc., who have been significant in your lives. Consider Abel and Enoch and Noah. Consider Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Jacob. It’s certainly not that these great saints of old were without trials and tribulations. It’s not that they lived without fear and worry. But they endured [Matt. 24:13] in the faith to the end, says the writer to the Hebrews, because they set their minds on things that are above. He says, they “*acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth,*” that they had another “*homeland,*” “*a better country,*” “*a heavenly one.*”

They had faith in God’s promise: of the seed of Woman come to crush the serpent’s head, of a righteousness that comes by faith, of the miraculous offspring

of “good as dead” Abraham with the barren womb of Sarah through whom all the nations of the world would be blessed, the offspring who, by baptism into His name and faith in Him, would give Abraham offspring more numerous than the stars: Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, all one in Christ Jesus, all sons of Abraham.

That promise has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the good pleasure of the Father. In fulfillment of His promise He sent His only Son to you as a baby born in hardship. Amidst the worries of “*where shall they stay,*” Jesus was born and laid in a lowly manger, no crib for His bed. In fulfillment of His promise the Father sent His own Son to you as One who had no place to lay His head. He sent His Son as a Shepherd to lay down His life for you, O little flock. Have no fear, but believe. In fulfillment of His promise He sent His own Son to you, that you, sheep of His flock, might hear His voice and follow after Him, that you might believe in Him and not perish but have everlasting life. In fulfillment of His promise He raised His Son back up again on the third day, victorious over worrisome sin and anxious death. And in fulfillment of His promise He sent a Helper to you through His Son to reveal this Good News to you as to little children who hear the voice of their shepherd, who have been born of God and given faith.

And in this revelation, the Father has given you the victory: “*this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith,*” a faith that delivers you to the kingdom of the Son. To be sure, this kingdom is difficult to see. Thus the Father gives us faith: “*the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*” It is in this faith that we look forward to the coming again of Jesus to take us to His kingdom, our heavenly home.

So, fear not, at least not “*those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul*” — fear not earthly things; not even “*the foe who madly seeks your overthrow,*” as we just sang. Set your minds on things above, on the kingdom, on Christ. Trust in Christ. Receive His gifts — His word of grace, His Supper of forgiveness. Bring to remembrance your baptism. Keep your lamps burning. Be strengthened in your faith in Jesus; that is, “*Draw near to Him with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with [your] hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and [your] bodies washed with pure water. ... Hold fast the confession of [your] hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.*” He who promised is Jesus. Trust in Him, and yours is the kingdom.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.