

12TH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME | YEAR A

25 JUN 2023

Jer 20:10-13; Rom 5:12-15; Mt 10:26-33

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The words of today's first reading and Gospel might remind us of the words of Pope John Paul II on the day he was elected pope on October 16, 1978, when he said, "*Be not afraid.*" And as closely as those words have come to be associated with St. John Paul II, they are really not original with the pope. It is the same thing that is said time and again in both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, in one way or another: "Be not afraid." We don't hear or read those exact words each time, but that is the very important message coming to us in the Scriptures.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, or the Old Testament, God continually encourages His people to trust in Him. He will lead them, and He will never lead them astray. God tells them all of that. Through His prophets, God assures all who will hear that He cares for them and will guide them – if they will listen to Him. In the first reading today, we hear the prophet Jeremiah lamenting his situation – everyone is against him...he has no where to go. Then, he says, "But the Lord is with me, like a mighty champion: my persecutors will stumble, they will not triumph."

And yet, we see a kind of ebb and flow sometimes in those God has designated as His people in the Old Testament. The people trust God and turn to Him. Then, just as quickly it seems, they turn away from him and end up caught in the fear they have unwittingly allowed to come into their lives. But then they return to their God, and once again, He not only accepts them back, but protects them again from all their fears, and strengthens them in their weaknesses. We also see that in the New Testament sometimes, with Jesus and those who follow Him. There's again this ebb and flow in enthusiasm for Christ and His teachings, and then the periodic retreats from, not only His Presence, but His words, as well.

Some of that perhaps sounds like our own situation today. We stray into sin sometimes, and Jesus calls us back to Him, in the Sacrament of Penance, and covers us in His love, grace and mercy. And the message of Jesus – like that of the Father – is found in those words used by Pope Saint John Paul II: "Be not afraid."

In the opening verse of the Gospel, Jesus says, "Fear no one." The Father intimately knows each aspect of our lives and will care for us. What a consolation that should be – for each one of us! And Jesus tells the Apostles that those who kill the body cannot kill the soul – so we ought not fear the wrong things, but take care of the right things, like the eternal salvation of our souls. Jesus says that the Father knows the smallest of details, like when a sparrow falls to the ground, and because we are so much more valuable to God than many sparrows, He will take care of us.

But we need to be careful to note that the message was never that there would not be any trials in the lives of those who believed. There was nothing said that precluded earthly sadness, or distress, or sickness – or even death – or even a coronavirus pandemic that, unimaginably, kept us away from our Church, and the Holy Eucharist. From God, in the Old Testament, and Christ, in the New, there was simply the exhortation for us to trust and to not be afraid. We're to persevere, to continue on the right path.

We're told that whatever it is we're going through, it's ultimately going to be all right...whether we're able to see it now, or not. We're told to not give up, to not doubt...to not lose heart. We're told to not fear.

Fear is what paralyzes us when we allow it to replace hope and joy in our lives. It's what leads us the wrong way; it's what gets us in trouble. And we fear, very often, because we don't know. We don't know the way to go, or we don't know what to do, or we don't know who to turn to. That last one should always be the first one we tackle, because it's the most obvious, and it leads to answering the others – we need to turn to God first. We need to seek in Christ what we can't find – and are not going to find – anywhere else.

The truth of the matter is, however, that we don't just wake up one day and trust in God. We have to consciously move to that point and make that decision – in our hearts and in our lives. It has to be something we do, not something that just comes to us. But while it's not just something that “happens” to us, it is something we can – and should – pray for in our lives. It's in that prayer and in that need that we find ourselves increasing in our trust in God. Or to put it another way, it's our faith that increases.

There is a certain calm – that's unlike any other calm, I think – that comes to us when we've rejected fear and replaced it with trust in our Lord. And the beauty of that calm, that sense of sureness and abandonment to the Divine Will of God, is something we need to work at maintaining in our lives, so that our faith can grow. Sometimes that certainty and guidance from God is not all that clear, or obvious to us, and we wonder, “Where is God in all of this?” That's where the trust comes in, that's when our faith needs to be strengthened – through prayer, and our sacramental life.

We're strengthened through our prayer life. We're strengthened and unburdened through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. We're strengthened, nourished, and given new life through our reception of the Body and Blood of Christ in the Most Holy Eucharist.

In speaking about the Eucharist, Archbishop Etienne one time wrote that, “The Eucharist is central to our life as Church and as individual Christian believers. In a very real way, we cannot live without it.”

Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen once wrote that just as “The earth carries its own atmosphere with it as it revolves around the sun: so the soul can carry the atmosphere of God with it, in disregard of turbulent events in the world outside.” What beautiful imagery! – the soul carrying “the atmosphere of God” with it everywhere we go – regardless of all that threatens us in this life.

So, if we want to remove fear from our lives, if we want to truly be strengthened by Jesus through our reception of the Holy Eucharist – that which “*we cannot live without*” – then we need our soul to carry that “atmosphere of God” in us, and we need to embrace the truth of what is promised us in the words, “*Be not afraid.*”

