SERMON for Sunday, August 12, 2007
Hebrews 11:1-3,8-16, Luke 12:32-4o

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What Next?

Acrophobia, agoraphobia, arachnophobia, claustrophobia, theologicophobia - fear of heights, fear of open spaces, fear of spiders, fear of confined spaces, even fear of theology. There is a long list of that which makes us anxious and fear-filled, can cause us to have panic attacks or a vague sense of uneasiness. What is it that worries you? It can be concerns over losing your job and providing for your family, or the outcome of scheduled medical tests or the progression of a chronic condition. Your anxiety can be about money or relationships, not enough to do that is meaningful or too much to do that sometimes seems overwhelming, global concerns of climate and terror or local concerns of neighborhood pests and crime that seems petty unless it happens to you. Despite the cheerful demeanor of *Mad* magazine's mascot, Alfred E. Newman, encouraging us with the perpetual comment, *What? Me worry?* all of us, I imagine, on the surface or buried deeply somewhere, worry.

So what do we make of Jesus' words to his followers in the gospel of Luke, *Do not be afraid,* followed with advice positioning yourself for the future by selling your possessions and taking care of the poor with the proceeds, by clearing your mind and having your mental house ready for the coming presence of God's kingdom? The warning that the *Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour* does not do much to comfort. On the surface, it would almost seems as if scare tactics were being used to teach, which, as we all know, simply will not work in the long run. We can be bullied into submission, perhaps, or tremble at the thought of punishment, but we – workers, prisoners, students, children, spouses, students – will not flourish when our well-being is threatened. So how do we move from fear to faith? How do we live as our ancestors Abraham and Sarah, who set out to follow God not knowing where they were going, who thought for sure that time had run out on the possibility of procreation, who were promised many descendants, like sand on the seashore, in some grand and glorious future? Of them, and others who lead us as mentors and guides, it is written in Hebrews, *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*

I would like to share with you story of my family, of my grandmother. One hundred years ago in Hungary a young woman bundled up the few belongings of Louis, Tillie, and Margaret, her son and her daughters, and hurried them over to the home of her sister in Budapest. *You keep them here*, Julia pronounced. *I must get on the ship to America. I have heard that Bela has been killed, and I must go and find out. I will send for them when I can.* And thus began the long journey of my grandmother, who, with few resources except her courage, her stubbornness, her wits and her strength, made her way across the ocean. She discovered the truth that her husband, who had emigrated from Hungary the year before, had indeed been killed on the job in a railroad accident. Bereaved, bereft, with no money and no family, Julia was on her own. The only thing she knew how to do was cook, and there was a demand for good ethnic cooks in the boarding houses and hotels that filled the immigrant neighborhoods of New Jersey and New York. So Julia settled in rough-and-tumble Elizabethport, New Jersey, got a job as a cook, and eventually met fellow Hungarian immigrant George Rakacs. They married and had a son, Joseph, my father. It took years before Julia had enough money to send for Tillie and Louis, in

fact, they were young adults before she saw them again. She never saw Margaret again, who by then had married and started a family of her own.

She was a stubborn woman, and her stubbornness stood her in good stead while she was searching for her husband. While she lived in this country for fifty-seven years, she never learned to speak fluent English, yet without every hearing her story firsthand, I understood her inner strength. And I have often thought as the years have gone by that I do not know if I could have done what she did, if I could have set out on the unknown sea, to an unknown place, to an unknown future.

This is what God is calling us to do. Oh, not to necessarily get up and go to a foreign land, nor to abandon all that is loved and familiar. But to face our fears head on, to face the unknown, and to follow. And we are told how to do it. And there are assurances in place.

First of all, we have the assurance that when we get rid of all that possesses us, we will find freedom to be led in faith. This is more complicated that I am making it seem, but when Jesus says, *For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also,* we are being reminded that how we live, what we value, what we spend our time doing, what we spend our money buying, that with which we surround ourselves indicates what we think is of most importance. When we get rid of the things that crowd our closets, when we give away the unnecessary items that we own, when we stop protecting our property at the expense of our families, we will be freed to focus on God's kingdom. This and other teachings of Jesus about possessions always smacks of a rather demanding and radical way of life, unrealistic especially to us in our particular culture and society of independence and pride, and it is. Jesus asks us hard questions about our willingness to be transformed, to be changed. David Norgard of St. Paul's Episcopal Cathedral in San Diego, explained it this way: *[Jesus] did not say: Volunteering from time to time is a rewarding way to learn how different people live and gain a better understanding of the major issues confronting our society today. What he said was: Love your neighbor as yourself. [Jesus] didn't say: You will get a decent tax break if you donate some of your capital gains to a worthy non-profit of your choice...What he said was: Sell your possessions and give to a charity. [Jesus] didn't say: Consider joining a church...because it helps to build good character and is a rather pleasant way to network in the community. He said: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind.**

At the beginning of the wedding service I often include a Statement on the Gift of Marriage. It concludes, *this way of life must not be entered into carelessly, or from selfish motives, but responsibly, and prayerfully*…and that is the invitation of Jesus to us, to the life of faith and discipleship. There is commitment, on our part, and a promise, on his.

The second part of the invitation to faith is to be ready for action. We spend a lot of time waiting, and it is often an anxious time. When we are young we wait until we are grown, we wait for prosperity, we wait for happiness, we wait for health, we wait for death. Waiting is usually an anxious moment, like a parent waiting until a teen driver arrives home safely. What is it to wait for God, to be ready and prepared? I have shared with you before that T-shirt that I saw once, with the slogan proclaiming, like the last verse of our text for today, *Jesus is coming!* And at the bottom of the shirt is the admonition, *Look busy*! Jesus' words from Luke: *You must also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour*... is enough of a

warning to magnify the fear and anxiety with which we already live, knowing full well that our lives are less than charitable, less than compassionate, less than grateful, less than perfect. We certainly would not want to come face to face and account for all that we have done, or not done. This would be a misinterpretation of the words of Jesus, I believe. The Son of Man is coming, not at some great, indefinable future, but in the present day. Pastor Barbara Crafton gives it this perspective: *But it could also be that Christ is coming into my life today. That Christ constantly comes into my life, steadily inhabiting every moment and every chance, consistently stands ready to fill the random things of my random life with meaning. It could be that Christ is in my life and I haven't noticed, that I am so focused on preparing for an unknown future event that I can't see what is before me now.***

In this week's magazine *Christian Century*, I read this news item, titled *Long, Winding Road: Zachariah Jok Char was only five years old when he walked 1,000 miles for the first time. He was one of the Lost Boys and Girls of Sudan, victims of a 20-year civil war, who crossed Sudan, walking single file, to safety in Ethiopia after their villages were leveled and their families murdered. Char was nine when he and others were forced across a crocodile-infested river back into Sudan after war broke out in Ethiopia. And then they walked another 1,000 miles to a refugee camp in northern Kenya, where they lived for eight years. On June 16, Char walked in a procession of a different sort: down the aisle of Grace Episcopal Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, to be ordained to the priesthood. 'This was the fulfillment of the call God gave me,' said Char, who will lead a congregation of about 100 Sudanese immigrants who belong to Grace.****

*Do not be afraid...*This journey of life and faith can be lonely, can be frustrating, can be scary, can be worrisome, can be confusing. Sometimes we don't know where we are going, we don't know what the future holds, we aren't even sure of what we believe. Our hope and our assurance is that Jesus calls us and that Jesus comes with us. Thanks be to God. Amen.

**Synthesis*, August 12, 2007, p.2
***The Almost Daily eMo* from GeraniumFarm.org, August 10, 2007
****Christian Century*, Vol.124, No. 16, August 7, 2007, p.6