

Ordinary 33 11.17.24

Remember the story of Chicken Little? He was asleep when a cow chewed off the top a plant which was near the place where he was sleeping. A piece of the plant fell on Chicken Little's tail. Startled by the little limb that fell on him, he cried out, "The sky is falling! The sky is falling!" Chicken Little convinced the other animals around him that the sky was falling. He was certain of it and relayed to the others how he saw it with his own eyes. Based on Chicken Little's story, a hen, a turkey, and a goose were also convinced the sky was falling. In their fright, they ran to the fox's house. The fox was delighted to see them and welcomed them into his home, promising them refuge. The story ends with these lines, "And what happened to them after that I don't know, but nobody ever saw them again; if the sky really fell, I never heard about it."

The story of Chicken Little, while told to children, is really a story intended for adults.

Social scientists would say that we are programmed to react to fear. Our initial reaction to a threat is to either fight or flee. That fight or flight response enables our species to survive. As such, the fight or flight response is a good thing, since it comes from God. It becomes problematic, though, when that fear takes over our lives, controls how we make decisions, and overshadows the possibilities of what God can do for us.

Stating the obvious, the recent presidential and local elections used fear to motivate us to vote in a particular way. Think back to all the ads you saw for any of the candidates. It was the rare commercial or social media post that spoke only of positives. Instead, they exclaimed the other candidate was going to do this to you, take that away from you, or create a world that would be a hot mess for you and your loved ones. We might use the term "apocalyptic" to describe the tenor of these ads and social media posts.

The candidates know us and they know human nature. They preyed upon that sense of fear which is deeply rooted in our DNA. There was little which was hopeful in this election cycle.

Fear was present and well understood in the time of the prophet Daniel, who lived some 600 years before the birth of Christ. Daniel and his fellow Israelites were driven from their homeland. The center of worship for them, the Temple, was destroyed. They found refuge in neighboring nations where the citizens there treated these immigrants with contempt and made them take on the work of slaves. The Jews were afraid. Their future seemed dim. They had little hope.

Enter the prophet Daniel. Today's passage is an apocalyptic work. The word "apocalypse" literally means "to reveal." In the biblical tradition, apocalyptic statements reveal something. They tell us that in the midst of hardship and oppression, God still has the ability to offer hope and security. Daniel revealed to the people that if they turned back to God and gave themselves completely to him, then things would get better. They might experience freedom and even return to their homeland. Daniel reveals the hope that is reflected in all apocalyptic biblical literature.

In the gospel, Jesus uses apocalyptic imagery to describe what surrounded him. The Jews of Jesus' day felt oppressed by the Romans who unjustly occupied their homeland and burdened them with heavy taxes and physical threats. They felt the pressure put on them by the religious elite who sought to shake down their fellow countrymen for their own financial prosperity or status. It was a dark and somewhat hopeless time for the Jews who lived in Israel during the 1st Century.

Like Daniel the prophet, Jesus comes on the scene to remind these oppressed people that despite all these things happening around them, God would save them. He called the Jews to repent from sin and to listen to the Good News he preached. In doing so, they would feel unburdened and would be able to carry on with confidence.

Like you, I've had several fear-filled, almost terrifying experiences in my life.

One that stands out is when I went on a mission trip to Haiti about 15 years ago. I led a group of doctors and other members of our parish to minister to the sick in that community and to help rebuild their homes. While far up in the mountains where our twin parish was, the Haitian pastor leading our group suddenly died. At that point, our group had lost its lifeline to the outside world.

My first reaction to this awful event was paralysis. I couldn't move or think. But slowly and with the grace of God came courage, wisdom, and the drive to do something to make a difference.

Our group collectively decided to stay for another several days to minister to the poor who lived on that mountain. Even though we didn't speak the language, even though we weren't sure how we would get home, God gave us what we needed to minister as best we could. It was truly miraculous.

Since Jesus was fully human (as well as divine), he certainly experienced fear. I'm sure he was fearful when confronted by the devil while in the desert for forty days. There's a good chance he was fearful when the religious folks of his day threatened to stone him to death or throw him off the cliff. He must have felt fear in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before he was condemned to die on the cross.

How did Jesus react to all that? He didn't punish those around him. He didn't seek retribution. Rather, he continued to speak out and stand up for what was right. He didn't flee the scene. He continued preaching and ministering to the people in other towns.

With his Father and the Holy Spirit, Jesus remained faithful to the task. He was tolerant, upright, and continued doing the will of his Father.

In these days, it isn't uncommon for folks to declare that the sky is falling. Others are saying that in this time in history we are about to enter a new golden age. As Christians, we know that neither approach is compatible with our faith. Our way forward is to once again put God first in our lives, as the prophets have taught us and as Jesus always exemplified. And we must embrace the fact that God's Kingdom and our eternal home isn't here on this earth, no matter how good things appear to be right now.

Secondly, we are called to act. Those who prey on our fears are hoping we will do nothing and keep our mouths shut. Certainly, that is what the evil one is hoping we will do. And when we do nothing and say nothing the evil one wins.

But we aren't powerless. We shouldn't just wait for things to pass or gloat in the mistaken notion that everything is now perfect and secure. Instead, we are commanded to make a difference - in this time and in this place. We can do that because God is with us. As the Father enabled Jesus to face his persecutors, as he enabled him to endure crucifixion, as he rejoiced when the Son was raised from the dead, so too does God bless us with a similar grace. We may at times be afraid, but we are never vanquished. Things will happen; the sky may fall. Our faith-response is to build our life-foundation on God and to trust in him rather than the fleeting things of this world. That's our message and our mission...today and always. For God reigns and his heavenly Kingdom will last forever.

Amen? Amen!