

August 7, Ordinary 19C (Luke 12:32-40)

In the shadow of uncertainty, fear and hope look similar.

by [Paul Lutter](#) in the [July 27, 2022](#) issue

“Pastor, don’t tell us we’re afraid.” These words rolled softly from the mouth of a man named Bill.

The congregation’s council gathered around me in a semicircle. I prayed for our conversation. They wanted to know what questions I had. “What does the gospel sound like in this place?” I asked. “And what does it look like in the life of the congregation?” The looks they gave me suggested that these were not the questions they were prepared to answer, at least not right away. Still, the nervous laughter with which they met me, and the way they shook my hand without looking me in the eye, left me curious to understand where the congregation’s grief and pain were lodged.

“And don’t tell us we need to change,” Rachel, who told me she was the most senior member of the congregation, said in a whisper.

Fred, a man whose foot was wrapped in a white plaster cast and propped on a chair, slammed his hand on the table. “Look, just promise us you’re not going to let politics get into the pulpit.”

Then another member of the council—who wouldn’t identify herself—rolled her eyes as she said, “Pastor, please don’t talk about healing. We’ve heard it all before. And look: we’re no better off for it.”

This is a conversation I had some years ago with a congregation that was considering me as an interim pastor. They ended up not calling me, in part because I pointed out that though they were afraid, Jesus walked with them. They didn’t seem to like what I said.

This congregation is similar to others with whom I've interviewed—and to the world in which we live. Pervasive fear hides itself in, with, and under umbrage. But what is the right way to talk about our concerns when every word we know to use sizzles us into separation from one another—and from God? What word will free us up to set down our shields so we can see and hear where and how we are invited into healing with one another—and with God?

Prior to this passage in Luke's Gospel, there is a struggle between two brothers around their inheritance: one asks Jesus to tell the other to share what they have been given. But Jesus is self-differentiated enough to recognize the concern is larger than either brother realizes: "One's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions" (12:15). This leads to a parable in which Jesus walks the community through the thorny thicket involving the rich and their wealth: What will they do once they've got more than they know what to do with? And what if what they imagine to be the rest of their life is cut short? "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God" (12:21).

With this week's story, Jesus turns soft light toward his listeners, making room for them to see themselves in a surprising profile. He opens their eyes to see their separation from God but also opens their imaginations, which makes room for them to find their way back again. This is the way of a good story: our realities are revealed and the hope of the future disclosed, all in the gentle light of grace.

The surprise in this story about a master, servants, and a wedding banquet isn't necessarily that we are found asleep—we are the servants, after all, and sleepy at that. Who hasn't wanted to curl up into a ball and sleep until all that befalls our world and us comes to an end? It's no surprise that the master calls on the servants to stay awake and alert, and some read the end of this story as prescriptive.

But what exactly happens when the Son of man comes upon the servants whose willingness is trumped by their fear that causes them to fall into sleep? Is it judgment, and thus cause for greater fear?

I wonder if it's the opposite. In the shadow of uncertainty, fear and hope look similar. Reading the end of this story through a lens of hope, one first sees the revelation of our sleepiness. And then, when the door opens and the Son of man arrives, the first word spoken is one of invitation. The Son of man's belt is fastened. All has been prepared. As sleepy and as afraid as we are, the word of invitation opens us to the

promise that we are not alone. We are seen. We are heard. We are nourished and sustained. There is room for us, now and into the future.

This kind of story opens us up to life together. We long for an invitation to this table but also for community. And in that longing, the invitation to follow in the ways of God is disclosed. In ways human and divine, we are set free from isolation into wide-open spaces of accompaniment.

I ask congregations about the sound and sight of the gospel where they are in order to make room for the community to reflect on where God has met them in their story so far. Whether they realize it or not—as dire as things are, as afraid as they are—their story is not at its end. As the gospel does its work, their story continues. In the light of grace, nothing is ever lost.

When it's all said and done, we are invited to sit and eat together and to tell our stories in the light of a day that has no end.