

**Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A  
(June 22, 2008)**

***Nothing to Fear But Fear Itself***

Recently I read a story that seems appropriate for the readings that you just heard. It seems there was an elderly lady who had saved her pennies for years for a trip to the Holy Land. She had never flown before and was very much afraid of flying. There were four bishops on the plane with her but their presence did not allay her fears. She kept her eyes closed tightly during take-off and only opened them when they had reached their cruising altitude. Then she looked out the window just in time to see one of the four engines of the plane fall off and go tumbling through space. Panic! More frightened than ever as the plane turned around to go back to New York for repairs, she started crying out, “We’re going to die.” The flight attendant tried to comfort her by saying, “It’s all right. We can make it with three engines. After all even though we only have three engines, we have four bishops and that should keep us safe.” She looked at the attendant and said, “I’d feel much safer if we had four engines and three bishops!”

Well, it’s an amusing story. But it says something about the human spirit that our readings address today: the power of fear in our lives and what it can do to make things a little bit crazy at times or even interfere with our ability to respond to the call of God.

What are we afraid of? What can make our hearts pound? I’m afraid of big dogs that come running and barking at me – especially if their teeth are bared! People can be afraid of losing their jobs or their homes, afraid of crime on our streets, especially with the rash of homicides that have occurred in Washington recently. These are legitimate fears. Those who have experienced the ravages of war or ethnic cleansing, famine or drought, floods or hurricanes or earthquakes have good reason to fear.

Jesus in the Gospel tells us in spite of all of these things, do not be afraid. But let’s look first at Jeremiah in our first reading. He was the most reluctant of all the prophets. He knew how the prophets were treated: badly because people did not want to hear their message of reform. So when God called him he said, “No, no I can’t do it. I’m too young.” But God

said, “Don’t worry. I’ll take care of you.” Jeremiah said, “I can’t talk, I stutter.” God said. “Don’t worry. I’ll put my word in your mouth. I’ll tell you what to say.” And from that moment Jeremiah became a prophet and said what the Lord told him to say, and guess what? What he feared came about. He was persecuted and threatened with death. And in his old age, Jeremiah rants and rages against God. We heard some of it just now. In another passage he complains, “You duped me. You deceived me and I let myself be duped.”

But what happened with Jeremiah was this: God touched him. God quite literally put God’s word in his mouth – and then there was no turning back. He had to speak. And in his old age, after all his complaining, he winds up saying what you heard a little while ago: Sing to the Lord, praise the Lord. For the Lord has rescued the life of the poor – that is, himself – from the power of the wicked. His faith and the grace of God enabled him to persevere even against persecution and the threat of death.

In the Gospel Jesus says, “Fear no one. . . . Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. . . . Your father in heaven knows when a sparrow falls to the ground. So do not be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.”

Well, many times our fears are ungrounded. People in positions of authority sometimes use fear to manipulate others to do what they want them to do. But there are also many occasions when our fears are legitimate. Jesus encourages his followers not to nurse their fears. Rather faith should make fear manageable and eventually perhaps squelch it altogether.

Harry Emerson Fosdick, a famous Protestant preacher, once said in a sermon based on our Gospel passage: Fear imprisons, faith liberates; fear paralyzes, faith empowers; fear disheartens, faith encourages; fear sickens, faith heals; fear makes useless, faith makes serviceable – and most of all – fear puts hopelessness at the heart of life while faith rejoices in its God.

So, regardless of whether there are three engines and four bishops or four engines and three bishops, it is faith in God alone that will allay all fear – or at least make it manageable. And as Julian of Norwich heard Jesus say at a time when she was very much afraid, “All manner of thing shall be well.”