

I have a few vices in my life of which I am not very proud.

Many of you are already aware of my severe coffee addiction
that I continue to nurture on a daily basis.

I'm not proud, I'm just honest.

But the vice that comes to mind today is my love for purses.

I really like purses.

Never been one for shoes, but I enjoy purses.

I would guess that there are a few women here

that may share this disordered love with me

and probably a few men who tolerate our indulgence.

I can remember many years ago,

before I left for seminary,

one of my friends teasing me about purses.

He wondered, in a good natured way,

how much extra cash I would have if I liquidated my inventory of purses.

He had a good point.

In return I asked him how much extra money

he could give away if he sold the tools he didn't use.

That pretty much wrapped up the conversation.

In all seriousness though, purses come to my mind today

because of the gospel lesson that we read together.

The first time I read through this text earlier in this week

one line truly stood out to me.

From verse 33, "Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out."

That sounds so foreign to me.

I don't know that I understand it at first pass.

It seems to me that every purse I've ever had,

no matter how much I liked it and took care of it, eventually wears out.

So how can we be about the business of making purses that don't wear out?

Interesting passage.

And really the whole text before us today
seems to be a bit of a head scratcher.

This is a call to action, a call to readiness.

A reminder that as God's people
we are called to more than the things of this life.

We are called to watch and to be people of hope.

But at the same time it is a reminder of God's protection.

It is a reminder of the freedom we are given
through God's forgiveness
and it reorients our priorities
or as my dad would say, it's an attitude adjustment.

And this passage begins with one of the most common phrases in Scripture,

"Do not be afraid."

That familiar greeting of angels and messengers for God.

Do not be afraid!

Words that can be full of comfort and an outright command.

Is this law or gospel?

It can be hard to tell.

But however we hear these words,

they serve to do more than just sound nice.

Hearing, "Do not be afraid!" is a connection to the past.

This is a reminder of God's history and of our holy history.

This is a call for us to remember where God has acted in our lives.

For the very early church,

this short phrase connected the challenges they were going through

with the trials of their ancestors.

For the small group of disciples following Jesus,

when he spoke these words,

it would have recalled the stories of the forerunners of faith.

People like Abraham and Sarah who were recalled in our first lesson,

This couple that God caused to be parents at an old age,

as good as dead, the passage from Hebrews says.

And yet, God granted them great faith to do his will and fulfill his promises.

And from the time of Sarah and Abraham,

God has been joining his people through these words, do not be afraid.

With this greeting, we are reminded that our story is united with the gospel story.

And the gospel story is united with God's holy history.

Since the dawn of time, God has joined us and greeted us with these words!

Reminding us that the stuff and the worries of this life are temporary.

Reminding us that it is God's good pleasure to give his people his kingdom.

It is his good pleasure to bless and to nurture,

to feed and to forgive,

to reconcile and to make whole.

And depending on the day, that can be a blessing or that can feel like a command.

It can be freeing and at the same time restrictive.

Heeding the command to not be afraid, means that we are free to let go.

We are free to let go of anxieties,

free to let go of shame

and free to let go of guilt.

But it also means that we are free to let go of control,

free to let go of keeping up appearances

and free to let go of our possessions.

And we are freed of these things because of what God has already done for us.

God has called us his children.

God has claimed us as his own.

Through baptism into Jesus Christ's death and resurrection,
we have been united to God in an unbreakable bond.

And because God seeks to give us the kingdom we are free to not be afraid.

And we are free to remember our own holy history
– as individuals as families and as a congregation.

This is a time for us to recall

where we have seen God active in our own lives,
where we have seen God move through our families and close friends
and where God has led our congregation.

Throughout the past fifty-one years,

God has been with us here at Epiphany.

God has been with us through chartering a new congregation,
through building programs,
through pastoral transitions,
through new ministries,
through a merger,
and through a second campus building project.

God has been here as we have heard his Word read,

celebrated countless baptisms,
been nourished at his table,
celebrated marriages,
and held services for our dearly departed.

God has been with us as we have served our community,

tended to the needs of our friends and family,
chatted in the hallways,
met by the coffee pot,

dropped our kids off at child care,
met in small groups,
confided in one another,
laughed with each other
and cried with each other.

God has been with us through joyful times and through sorrowful times,
through times of feast and times of famine.

God is with us now,
as we look forward to dedicating a new building later today,
even in the midst of transition times and financial difficulties.

God is continuing to journey with us and to call us forward as his people.

And I think when we are in times of transition and times of trial,
it can be easier to see God's hand at work.

I happen to think we are going through both of those – transition and trial.

Our financial challenges as a congregation are no secret.

In your announcements this morning,
you will find a letter from the council
outlining the reality in our congregation.

I appreciate our council for their sense of openness and transparency
in sharing this information with everyone.

In order to move together into God's future,
we need to have a shared reality.

And my hope is that this information will help us to have a shared reality.

A budget shortfall isn't the end of the world,
but it is an invitation to action.

Having a shortfall of resources may call us to use what we have more effectively
and to be more discerning with how we steward our resources.

Often when we have less we are forced to rely more on God.

We are called to sacrifice and in the process

we are blessed to see more clearly
where God is active and where God is leading us.
In a sense, we are often given an attitude adjustment.

When we have less in our pockets, we have an opportunity to focus.

To rediscover our identity,
to remember what makes us who we are.

As a congregation, this is a chance for us to renew our identity in Christ.

To remember that we are God's people,
we are one of God's little flocks
and we are led by the good shepherd.

This is a chance for us to renew our relationship with God
and to invest in our relationships with one another.

When times are challenging investing in relationships
- especially being open and vulnerable can be difficult.

We live in a culture that teaches us to not show our hurt and to not reveal our pain.

That being honest shows weakness and makes us feel uncomfortable.

And yet when we attempt to hide these emotions,
they tend to lurk just under the surface
and sneak out in unhealthy and unexpected ways.

I know for me it is often easiest to be angry at those people

and situations closest and dearest to me
- like my husband, my close friends and my church -
than it is for me to be honest about what is hurting me
and what the biggest challenge I feel I am facing.

For some reason, taking out my pain

and covering up where I don't want to be vulnerable on those I love the most
seems to make more sense than being open and honest.

But when we are brave enough to be real with one another,

when we are open and honest
and authentic with our shared identity in Christ
we are free to be vulnerable and free to be open.

And that openness and vulnerability is invaluable
to our ability to invest in relationships.

Relationships built on the foundation of our common identity in Christ,
relationships that end up being like purses that don't wear out.

Relationships are the bonds that hold together the body of Christ.
They are those purses that don't wear out.

And maybe this image from our gospel fits us right now.

I know that as a community we are facing a number of financial stressors.
Our country is facing a terrible recession affecting all of us.
The job market in the greater Dayton area has experienced a downturn.

With these and other transition issues in our congregation,
the fact of the matter is our own budget
has a variety of factors causing its shortfall.

But in every trial there is an opportunity.
Or another way I have heard that stated is in every test,
there is a testimony.

Each of us as individuals are experiencing the factors
impacting our budget in a different way.

While it is easiest for us to deny how we are being impacted
or to take out our pain and frustrations out in unhealthy ways,
the challenge before us is to be open and honest about where we are.

To not just say, "I'm fine," every time someone asks how we're doing.
But to find ways to be honest.

God surrounds us with companions on our journey.
And here we are, gathered in his house on his day for worship.
Not just by ourselves, but together.

This, too, is one of God's gracious gifts.
And because he has blessed us with each other,
he also calls us to care for each other.
To be a community where it is okay to be ourselves,
to share our joys and sorrows,
and to support one another through our differences
because of our common identity rooted in Christ.
These relationships, with God and with one another
are the purses that don't wear out.
And we are called to care for ourselves and our community.
Often times how we spend our time and money,
where we place our earthly treasure orients our lives.
If we place our treasure completely in our possessions,
we tend to be oriented solely toward our possessions
– as though they own us.
If we place our time and money investing in relationships,
we tend to be oriented outside of ourselves.
Instead of being oriented to things and slaves to our stuff,
we become servants of one another and slaves to the cross.
The cross which serves to remind us that our own master,
Jesus Christ, died for our sins and chooses to become our servant.
That the king of kings welcomes us to his table
and hosts a meal to strengthen us through hard times
by forgiving our sins.
This is God's gracious gift to us.
And this outpouring of love and grace invites us to a response.
It invites us to invest in one another.
This investment is an act of discipleship.
A matter of discipline.

Investing in relationships take prioritizing our time
and efforts toward one another.

It calls for a sense of urgency, a sense of faith and a sense of trust.

Not trust in earthly possessions, but trusting that God fulfills his promises.

Trusting that as God has moved in our lives in the past,

God will continue to move in our lives now and in the future.

That all of the unknowns of a restricted budget and transitions will be put to rest.

That ultimately God's reality free of sin and death will be our reality.

And until that time comes, we are called to watch and wait.

To care for one another and journey together.

And to remind each other of those familiar words, "Do not be afraid!"