We are always glad to be together in this place, but if you are like me, given the events of the past week, you might be carrying some extra grief or anger in your heart today.

We were making our way through the chaos, the good and the bad, the joy and the grief of life. Then we heard Jesus say, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." But we have good reasons to be afraid.

Eight days ago a man in Texas drove ten hours across the state, walked into a Walmart store and shot 46 people with an assault rifle. 22 of them died. The man’s intention was to kill as many Hispanic people as possible, but we all have reason to be afraid. The number of gun deaths in the United States has grown steadily since 2004. In 2019 more than 100 Americans are dying every day from gun injuries.

We have good reasons to be afraid and we have good reasons to be frustrated. Just a few months ago the House of Representatives allocated $50 million to study the epidemic of gun violence in the next budget year. These would be the first taxpayer dollars spent by the US government to study anything related to guns since 1996. But the leaders of the Senate have refused to support funding for research into prevention of gun violence. Senate majority leader McConnell refused to convene a special session of congress to take up the matter. “We’ll talk about it when we return from our vacations in September.” Guess how many people will die between now and the middle of September? My guess is at least 3000.

We were making our way through the chaos, the good and the bad of life when a small group of us gathered for our regular Monday Bible Study. Imagine our surprise when we read these words from Isaiah chapter 1: When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.

God is frustrated and angry. The owners of the plantations are corrupt. The rich are stealing from the poor. The power brokers in government and business only care about their own interests. Then they go to the temple for worship services. Hear the word of the Lord. What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams. I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats.

These words of Isaiah were delivered to the rich nation of Israel in the 8th century and they are delivered to us, to the rich nation of the United States of America in the 21st century. In both times and places the rich and powerful hide behind their very public attendance at worship services. God is having nothing of it: Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. I cannot endure your solemn assemblies with iniquity.

What could be the problem? People are going to worship. Isn’t it a good thing to listen to Holy Scriptures and to say the prayers? It is good, but only if we are changed. It is good for us to pray, but God help us, it is evil for us to say the prayers and not mean what we say. It is evil for us to pray to God, but to put our faith in our guns or in our money. It is evil for us to use prayers as an excuse for doing nothing.

We were making our way through the chaos, through the good and the bad, and sometimes it seems like the constant news of mass shootings will never end. We have reasons to be afraid and frustrated and even angry. We live in a nation where restaurants can be sued for serving coffee that is too hot, but gun manufacturers are protected from lawsuits. In 2005 congress passed a law giving immunity to gun manufacturers from civil lawsuits. The damages awarded in civil lawsuits might seem excessive but they have the effect of making companies ensure their products and services are as safe as possible. The result is that cars are safer and children’s toys are safer and food is safer.

We are very, very safe, except for all of the guns. There are now about 300 million guns in America, including more than 5 million assault rifles. We have good reasons to be afraid and frustrated and angry. We have reason to be filled with grief
In the 8th century before Christ God was filled with anger and grief at the behavior of the leaders of the nation of Israel. Let’s take a guess at how God might respond to the current situation in America. Today in America the number one cause of death for black and brown children is gun violence.

*Your new moons and your national day of prayer breakfast and your appointed festivals my soul hates. Your worship services and sabbath gatherings are repulsive to me. They have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them.* God is weary of bearing them. God is repulsed by people who are so sure they are right that they are unchanged and unchangeable. God is repulsed by people who refuse to be changed to the way of God’s love. God is repulsed by people who are unmoved by the deaths of dozens of innocent people every day.

God is weary of listening to a bunch of people who pretend to turn to God in prayer, but who are actually turning to the National Rifle Association in homage and worship. You can tell they do not worship the God of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures because our scriptures say every person is created in the image of God. We can either honor and preserve the rights of children and adults to not have their lives cut short by gun violence or we can honor and preserve the rights of individuals to own and use weapons of mass destruction. We cannot do both.

Those who worship their guns argue that the days after a massacre is not the time to convene a special session of congress. Oh no. If we were to do that we might actually take steps to end the violence the way New Zealand did after the Christchurch massacre. In New Zealand parliament passed a comprehensive law to address the problem of gun violence 26 days after the Christchurch massacre. The vote was 119 to 1. In America it seems like half of our political leaders refuse to take any action except to offer their thoughts and prayers.

What does God think of the prayers of those who refuse to take action to protect the children and adults of this nation? *When you stretch out your hands in prayer I will hide my eyes from you. Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood.* In America, the blood of children and parents and grandparents is all over our streets and it’s all over our schools and stores and restaurants. And some of us have hands that are covered in blood.

We were making our way through the chaos of life, through the good and the bad, and we listened to another speech of someone promising to solve the problem. We felt like we have heard enough of people who are famous for not telling the truth. We are desperate to hear the words of someone who speaks with integrity.

Integrity is the cornerstone of love. Without honesty there is no love. And we know we need love. Love is the only thing strong enough to drive away the fear. We need love to drive away the sort of fear and anger that motivated the shooters in El Paso and Dayton.

*Jesus said to his disciples, “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.* Jesus is encouraging us to live without fear. Jesus is encouraging us to lay aside all of the traits of our fearfulness, including our attachment to our guns, in order to live the kingdom life.

The kingdom life is a life that is not focused on possessions, whether those possessions are guns or homes or clothes or cars. The kingdom life is a life that is focused on God’s people, that’s all of us. *Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

We were making our way through the chaos of life, through the good and the bad. To our great relief we heard this voice of integrity, the voice of Jesus. Do not live lives of fear. Make purses for yourself that will never wear out. Build up a treasure of the kingdom life. The kingdom life looks like a great variety of activity: listening and laughing and crying and working together. But all of the activities are marked by integrity, by coherence between our words and our actions. The kingdom life is called by many names: people and love and community and fellowship. But it is all for the purpose of one thing: building the kingdom of God.

We were making our way through the chaos of life, through the violence, the fear, the anger and the grief. Then we heard the words of Jesus. Jesus encouraged us to leave behind our lives of fear. We listened to his description of the kingdom and we said to one another, “Let’s build it here.”