

Do Not Be Afraid

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Do not be afraid.

Do not be afraid. That's what the angel of the Lord told those terrified shepherds out in the field keeping watch over their flock while the glory of the Lord lit up the night sky bright as day. We have heard it before in this season of angels appearing to all the leading characters: to Zechariah whose wife Elizabeth was far too old to have a baby; to the betrothed, but not yet married, Joseph; and to Mary who, despite her virginity, was beginning to feel the flutter of new life down in her belly. Do not be afraid.

In the coming months, during Lent, we will hear those same words again from the lips of Jesus. On his way to the cross, just after Jesus assures his disciples that they will join him where he is going on that promised day of resurrection, he showers them with compassion saying, "Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid."¹ Then on Easter, when we show up at dawn outside the empty tomb, it is the very first thing the angel will say to us there.² Do not be afraid.

Of course, every time we hear this refrain in the New Testament, we remember many times it was spoken in the Old. As we slowly emerge from the long and difficult pandemic season, what a welcomed word to hear from one of this year's Advent prophets, Zephaniah, who assures us, "You shall fear disaster no more."³ Zephaniah proclaims a glorious salvation when God's judgements are gladly removed, the people will be renewed in God's love, and songs of praise will resound throughout the earth. As the people return from exile, their long season of trauma comes to an end. Likewise, our favorite Christmastime prophet, Isaiah, repeatedly invites our trust in God to triumph over fear. During the many months of offering pastoral care at a distance to isolated congregants, I often recalled Isaiah's promise, "Thus says the Lord: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name and you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you."⁴ Those words are engraved on the four sides of the stunningly beautiful baptismal font in the Salisbury Cathedral, which became one of the first public vaccination sites in the United Kingdom. Throughout that lofty worship space, people waited in rows around that central font, an ever-flowing reminder that Christian baptism is an immersion into deep waters and from which we are raised by the gracious hand of God who repeatedly invites us not to fear.

I have not done the count myself, but I have read in a number of places that the words, "Do not be afraid," appear in the Bible three hundred and sixty-five times. Once for every day of the year, and this has certainly been a year when we needed to hear that chorus over and over. Do not be afraid.

When fear is a good thing

Now, of course, fear is not an altogether unwelcomed emotion. It can be a rational reaction to an identifiable danger or threat. Fear of getting or spreading the coronavirus led us to maintain our distance, to wear face masks, and to get vaccinated in order to try to keep ourselves and those around us safer. That behavior is a good and

appropriate use of fear. Psychologists tell us that when we come into the world, we have innate, built-in fears. Fear of falling helps us adapt safely to our surroundings; fear of abandonment is an important protection enabling us to admit our dependence on others for survival. My young adult son who hikes with his rescue dog in the Blue Ridge Mountains recently had to take her to a sensitization class so that she would learn to fear rattlesnakes and copperheads. A positive reinforcement approach to snake avoidance is a good thing for the dog as well as our son. At a basic level, fear heightens our senses and awareness, guiding our fight or flight response as an important means of protection.

Similarly, the Biblical concept of fear relates to a broad array of emotions, many of which are commended to us by God and God's messengers. The Book of Proverbs begins with the common aphorism, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,"⁵ and this meaning of fear is often synonymous with reverence, awe, faith, and wonder, the kind of postures the children of God are encouraged to assume. In the Acts of the Apostles, Cornelius is described as just such a devout person characterized by his giving generously and praying constantly.⁶ Psychologically then, realistic fear can be a healthy thing; it keeps us from making foolish mistakes or taking dangerous risks. Likewise, biblical connotations of fear encompass a wide range of complex emotions, postures, and experiences appropriate to the human and divine relationship. These forms of fear build up the character and define the call to discipleship.

The fear addressed by the angels

So what kind of fear are Advent's angels trying to get us to relinquish as they hover in the sky repeating for the shepherds what Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann says is the primary, fundamental, and persistent message of the whole Bible?

The angels are addressing the kind of fear that overwhelms us. They are neither singing about the fear that keeps us safe and alive nor the fear that is better translated as awe and faith and wonder. They are proclaiming a power stronger than anything that might have a stranglehold on us in order to embolden us to let go of the fear that keeps us from living into and up to our calling. They are addressing the kind of fear that impedes our trust in God and prohibits our responding to God's abundant gifts with joy and generosity, with faith and hope, with passion and compassion for others.

What is unique and timeless about Christmas is the celebration that God entered a moment in human history in person, doing a new thing to reveal God's abiding love and care for us. God decided to make a full and unreserved investment in the created order and among the human family so that we might become more fully human for the glory of God and the good of creation. In the midst of a fearful world, God draws close to us so that we might be drawn closer to God through Jesus, once a vulnerable child through whom we are shown that we can put our trust in God. We are invited to remember always, come what may, that we are not alone. In everything that makes us human, even unto death, God's love, mercy, and peace are greater than human fear, greater than any seemingly debilitating emotional state.

As if returning from a kind of exile, we slowly emerge from a long season in which we have monitored daily the pandemic death toll ticking higher and higher, a time when we have wept as strangers said their farewells over cell phones held up by ICU nurses, and more than a year in which we have been isolated from people we love and the community we treasure as our church family. Amid these and every form of

loneliness and isolation, we are never alone. That's the knowledge those angels wanted to impart to Zechariah and Joseph in their unique predicaments, and to Mary and the shepherds by their annunciations. From their holy script, they now wing their way toward us, inviting us to perceive that when they say "Do not be afraid," we might understand that through the person of Jesus Christ, in life and death and life eternal, we are companioned and redeemed by a good and gracious God. Do not be afraid.

What freedom from fear might look like

The Norman Rockwell Museum in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, is anchored by a central room in which Rockwell's original oil paintings of the four freedoms hang. Referring to President Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1941 State of the Union address, in which he outlined essential human rights that should be universally protected, these paintings were reproduced for *The Saturday Evening Post* during consecutive weeks in 1943 alongside essays by leading intellectuals of the day: "Freedom of Speech," "Freedom of Worship," "Freedom from Want," and "Freedom from Fear."

On a recent visit to the museum, as my husband and I moved from painting to painting, I was struck by how those essential freedoms, lifted up during World War II, feel so relevant today while we reckon with the assault on our nation's Capital building, the rise of white supremacy, the bitter legacy of our nation's institutional racism, current legislation to limit voters' rights, the dissemination of lies as truth, the widening gap between those who have more than enough and those who have not enough, and the cultural divisions that creep into the church and chip away at our sense of genuine communion. There is so much going on in our world, nation, community, and even our churches that makes us afraid. As we rounded the room from painting to painting in order, my husband said, "The last one not only speaks for itself, but it sums up all the others."

Freedom from Fear

You may remember how Rockwell painted the lovely bedtime scene of a mother leaning in and pulling up the covers up over two sleeping children. There are some cast off clothes and a doll on the floor. The father's head is bowed toward his little ones as he holds in hand his eyeglasses and a folded newspaper from which the headlines scream of bombings and horror abroad. The open door beyond this family shows a stairwell going down, conveying the relative affluence of a white midcentury American family typical of many of Rockwell's subjects.

The Norman Rockwell Museum is intent on preserving Rockwell's unique artistic depictions of American life over his long career, as well as the depth and breadth of his interest in humanitarian causes for justice. Many remember his picture of young Ruby Bridges bravely integrating her public school in Louisiana, but probably don't know he also painted the lynching of a black man that no one would publish.

Just last year the museum hosted a special exhibition entitled *Reinventing Rockwell*, in which another resident of the Berkshires, the artist Pops Peterson, remade some of Rockwell's iconic paintings from his contemporary African American perspective. Reimagining Rockwell's "Freedom from Fear," his "Freedom from What?" pictures a black mother tucking two children into bed while the father, clutching a newspaper with the headline shouting "I Can't Breathe!" looks out the window. The similarities and differences between Rockwell and Peterson are striking. Rockwell's painting

describes the London Blitz bombings being played out on a foreign shore, a good distance from those midcentury white American parents. Peterson's painting recounts Eric Garner's last words, now heard in the haunting echoes of George Floyd as he died under the knee of a police officer. While the two paintings share a similar bedroom setting and family configuration, Peterson draws a sharp contrast to Rockwell's white, affluent family by conveying his subject's source of fear is just outside that family's bedroom window. We who continue to contend with the insidious effects of racism in every aspect of our history, culture, and institutions are called to be mindful of how fear is contextual and often inequitably wrought.

Womanist biblical scholar Wilda Gafney addressed this nature of fear proclaiming the Christmas gospel message to a largely African American Philadelphia congregation saying,

We do not walk alone among the shadows of earth because God is Immanuel, God with us. In our brokenness, in our fullness, God is with us. God is with us when the bullets are flying, when the ground is shaking, when the planes are crashing, when the waters are rising, when the ship is sinking, when the winds are howling, when death is knocking, when the shadow of death stretches out and touches even Christmas—God is with us! God is with us when we are falsely accused and unjustly imprisoned. God is with us when we are raped and tortured and murdered. God is with us when our children, our precious children, are stolen from us. God is with them in their fear and horror! God is with us in our rage and sorrow and grief! God is with us! God is with the suffering and the dying, comforting and accompanying through that valley of death that we cannot yet enter. This is the Gospel, not that we're untouchable, not that we're inviolable, for even the Son of God was violated. But that we are never alone, never forsaken, never absent from the Divine presence is the Gospel of light and life.⁷

This is the gospel indeed. In every generation and across the wide diversity of human experience, the angels' "Do not be afraid" is a strong invocation of God's abiding love, mercy, peace, and justice. We cannot ultimately be overwhelmed by fear because we are never alone, never forsaken, never absent from the Divine presence. This is the message of Advent and Christmas when we receive God's gift which inspires us to faith and to hope and to joy. Do not be afraid, for unto you is born a Savior. That blessed refrain transports us to the place where our fears meet their answer, where God's unconditional love awaits our trust. The gospel truth hovering in the night air over Bethlehem's shepherds hovers over us and awaits its entry into our hearts.

Notes

1 John 14:27.

2 Matthew 28:5.

3 Zephaniah 3:15.

4 Isaiah 43:1-2.

5 Proverbs 1:7.

6 Acts of the Apostles 10:2.

7 Wilda Gafney, "When the Shadow of Death Touches Christmas," Memorial Church of the Good Shepherd, East Falls Philadelphia, December 30, 2012, wilgafney.com.