

"Do Not Be Afraid" ©

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Bloor Street United Church
Sunday, December 6, 2009 – Advent 2

Readings:

Based on Isaiah 43 & Matthew 1:18-25 – see scripture at end

An angel-whisper in the night: "Greetings, Mary." No wonder she is perplexed!

"Do not be afraid." And she isn't.

Dream-angel to Joseph: "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife." And he isn't.

To flock-abiding shepherds, their sky filled with sudden Glory, an angel says, "Do not be afraid." And they aren't.

That's how Advent (literally 'the coming') always comes - past our fears, big ones, little ones, rational, not.

I

In the world as we have it, fear comes with the territory. It's where God finds us, and speaks into our everyday lives.

Mary had been hoping for a good night's sleep.

Joseph was trying to figure out how he'd explain all this to his mother.

The shepherds planned to get in some good slingshot practice.

Surprise! God has other plans - with angel talk. The instinctive response? Fear!

Mary, do not be afraid (always the first words); you have found favour with God.

Joseph, do not be afraid; name your son God-with-us.

Zechariah, Isaiah, Moses, Saul: do not be afraid. Good news for all people!

God-speak/fear/assurance: a triple ripple through humanity's soul. God comes to us wherever we are, into our life experience, in pasture or palace, Bloor Street or heat vent, and says, "Do not be afraid."

In the primordial garden, home of all our souls, after Adam and Eve bite off more than God says they can chew (and hide because of it), God calls, "Where are you, Adam?" (We are Adam.) "I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."

God knows our name, the naked essence of who we are, and calls us from wherever we've hidden ourselves. Sometimes we hide so well we forget that we're hiding, and think it's where we're meant to be.

God-speak/fear/assurance: a triple ripple through humanity's soul.

Then - Adam blames Eve, Eve blames the serpent, and the serpent bites the dust.

Through it all, it is fear that is in control as humanity leaves paradise/innocence/Eden.

Fear is still the driving force! Or not!

II

Remember the Good News that Genesis paints in the final scene - as Adam and Eve leave the garden? God is wrapping 'skins' around them so we won't be left out in the cold, protective cloaks of do-not-be-afraid- assurance that is still around us - no matter night fears, or timidity before the day. Fear is not in charge unless we let it.

Moderator Mardi Tindal's Christmas message reminds us that there are many reasons to be afraid.

It's true. Some of us live with a terminal diagnosis; actually, we all do. Some of us, our children/grandchildren/friends fear illness, bankruptcy, divorce, accident, war, tornadoes; some fear tomorrow's math test, being left out of the 'in' crowd, a bad haircut. The list never ends. Fear can incapacitate us, and leave us hiding away.

Mardi also reminds us that there are many reasons to trust “the truth of angel assurance.”

Days after David Giuliano was elected Moderator, doctors told this bright young poet theologian that a tumour entwined around nerve and tissue in the side of his face had to be removed.

Notes From The Valley - Blog #8:

“I think that I am Moderator of The United Church of Canada because God gave me three words to speak: Be not be afraid. I’ve said and written literally millions of words ... None of them have so touched the collective spirit of our community. None have been more poignant in my own journey. They are a gift and a core to welcoming Holy Mystery into our lives.

David knows Isaiah well. (30:20) “Though the Lord may give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your Teacher will not hide any more; your eyes shall see your Teacher.”

Notes from the Valley - Blog #16:

I’ve spent much of the past four weeks in the grips of a heavyweight virus that put the boots to my immune system. My body went for a walk but my mind was like a crazed squirrel jumping from branch to branch of worries and fears. My body ambled along the glorious shores of Lake Superior. My mind, though, tripped over the jagged rocks of this illness and whether I can possibly be strong enough for this work that has chosen me. If my brain had hands, it would have been wringing them over what God wants of my weakness. This hurricane of medical worries, notes for upcoming sermons, dates, Bible passages, ideas for this blog, and confusion have touched down like three pounds of wet clay in my belly.

It’s hard to get clear when you are afraid. People comment on how ‘courageous’ I’ve been over these 10 months of surgeries, radiation, and now this set-back. That cracks me up. I have been experimenting full-time with fear (against my will, I might add). I’m trying to attend to “the Teacher” on our behalf.

Fear has taught me many things, including this: Tell the truth about fear. Talk with people who can listen. The other day, Eli (my doctor and friend) called to see how I was doing. I said I was feeling quite tired and still had an uneasy lump in my

stomach. He said, "That lump makes me wonder if you are feeling anxious." We talked a little about my worries, and the feeling in my stomach lifted almost instantly. Maybe if we all talked more honestly about our fears they would have less power over us.

III

NOTES FROM ANOTHER VALLEY - BB (before blogs) August 1963 - days before his "*I Have a Dream*" transfixed America and the world – from a biography of the King years. (*Parting the Waters - America in the King Years 1954-63* by Taylor Branch, 1988)

Martin Luther King buried his face in his hands at the kitchen table. He admitted to himself that he was afraid, that he had nothing left, that the people would falter if they looked to him for strength. Then he said as much out loud. His doubts spilled out in a prayer, ending, "I've come to the point where I can't face it alone."

As he spoke, the fears began to melt away. He became intensely aware of an inner voice telling him to do what he thought was right. Such simplicity brought a shudder of relief, and courageous faith, to face whatever the future held. It was, for King, the first transcendent religious experience of his life ... a moment that sparked in his heart what he'd always known in his head - that faith is always personal and grounded in life experience - something that opens up mysteriously like a new horizon beyond predicaments of human beings in our frailest and noblest moments.

Marie-Louise von Franz was an old lady when I met her years ago. Carl Jung's closest confidante, she said, "Fear dwells in the shadow part of our psyche. Whether our shadow becomes friend or enemy depends on us."

She said, "Fear is two-faced, it is saboteur; it lurks underneath, causes paralysis and collapse,

OR it can be the catalyst that teaches us Wisdom, and fulfills our finest dreams."

We live in a world inflicted by fear:

- fear of scarcity – is it behind the obesity pandemic – fear we'll never have enough?
- fear of strangers – that we instill in our children – some necessary in this 'fallen world', some just undermining a child's Eden trust.

We fear death – especially ‘of body’ – and the journey toward it that may lead through illness, indignity, pain, dependency.

But fear of the ‘death of soul’ should send shudders to our core, lest, when we shuffle off this mortal coil, we stand soul-naked before our Maker devoid of ‘Light and Love – because we were too afraid to really live.

Fear shapes our life so subtly that we hardly notice. It diverts us from being fully who God creates us to be.

Fear shapes our world. It’s the most powerful ‘weapon of terror.’ Powers and principalities keep nation against nation, brother against sister.

Twenty years ago today, Marc Lépine used it against female engineering students at École Polytechnique, leaving 14 dead on the floor, and fear rampant through the land. Tonight at 6, as for 20 years, there will be a memorial service – Philosopher’s Walk, by the Museum.

Two days after the attack, 200 women packed a little church parlour where I had begun to lead a meditation group. As irrational fear rippled through the neighbourhood, so did the need for assurance, somewhere to feel safe, centered in Christ. The triple ripple in a different order - fear/assurance/God-speak!

The other face of fear that empowers teaches Wisdom, enables us to stand tall, face down threats, fulfill our highest dreams, and declare to the world, “I have a dream.”

IV

So whatever jolts your night or terrifies your day; it has got your attention for some reason. Acknowledge it, confront it, befriend it, invite it to be your Teacher. Trust that God knows your name, and where you have hidden, and wraps protective love around you – whatever forbidden bites you’ve taken in whatever gardens, however long you’ve hidden in whatever trees. God is still calling you for God-only-knows what reason.

Natural healers see fear as dark blobs in our aura – that block the flow of Light, Life energy. Wherever we hide it, fear will be in charge, and will manifest (in its own way) in our physical, emotional, or spiritual body - which no pill can fix.

So choose the flip side; let it go; let it be your Teacher. Whenever it rears its ugly head and gets your attention, let it go, layer by layer – let the angels sing it away, until the still center of Christ is born in you.

It can be as simple as it was for Dr. King. Pray it away, talk it out, visualize it dissolving, walk it off; find a good massage therapist. Give it over to God.

An old story says that a seeker met Jesus on a lonely road. “Lord,” asked the pilgrim, “After all the people had been fed with the bread and fish, you said: Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost. What are the fragments that must be gathered up so nothing will be lost?”

Jesus gazed at the traveler a long time, then said, “The fragments are your fears, which multiply like loaves and fishes, and fill more baskets than you can carry by yourself. These must not be lost. They must be brought to me, so that I may bear them. In this way, nothing that is part of you will be left unfound.”

Christ has found every fragmented part of us, receives us, and bears us on – and this broken world.

V

Angels burst through. “Turn but a stone, and start a wing,” says Francis Thompson. One minute you’re racing around looking for signs of love to give your children, and the next, your heart overflows with the miraculous unmerited privilege of that love. One minute you’re rolling out gingerbreads, and the next you’re weeping for the world’s gnawing hunger for justice.

One minute you’re checking the TSE, and the next you remember hungry children in Haiti, and on our own streets.

The world aches for people whose fear is sung away by angels, whose hearts and hands are open – Mary, Joseph, shepherds, Moderators, Ministers of National Defense, justice seekers in every generation – you.

In this holy place, two Sundays before Christmas, God’s assurance comes again (and still) – in an angel chorus. Listen!

“Be not afraid; I bring you tidings of great Joy. To you is born this day a Saviour.”
Amen.

Scripture from Isaiah 43:

Thus says the Lord, who created you, O Jacob, who formed you, O Israel:

“Do not fear; for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name, you are mine.

When you pass through deep waters, I will be with you; through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned; the flame shall not consume you.

For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour ... you are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you ... do not fear, for I am with you.”

Matthew’s gospel tells us:

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

Her husband, Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.

But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, ‘God is with us.’”

When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded; he took Mary as his wife but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

May God bless us with understanding.