

“Three Precious Words”

A Christmas Sermon

Text: Luke 2: 1-14

Rev. Dr. Geordie Campbell

December 18, 2011

If I close my eyes and listen deeply I can almost hear my grandfather’s voice as he told us the Christmas story. It’s wonderful how tender things given at an early age stay with us! And among the many words he would recite, the ones that I loved to hear him say the most were these three: “Be not afraid!” Honestly, to my adoring ears, hearing him say that was pretty close to hearing it straight from God. Ever since then, that phrase has been deep at the heart of my Christmases.

I offer those three precious words as a Christmas gift this morning. I want us to receive them in such light because our culture is simply overflowing with a kind of reactive fearfulness that lives just beneath the surface of life. This being so, the spiritual practice of acknowledging and letting go of our fears is a life-skill that we all need to tend.

Let’s start our wondering in Bethlehem’s sky. We can only imagine what it must have been like to have an angel appear into the dark of the night! Scripture tells us that “They were sore afraid!” in one version. Another says, “They were terrified.” And another, “They were filled with fear.”

An aside: Did you know that there are two kinds of angels in the Bible?¹ This is true no matter how you interpret scripture - as metaphoric truth or literal event. The first kind of angel (called “malachi”) embody an earthly human form and show up into the midst of life – something like the TV series, “Touched By An Angel.” The other kind I (called “angelos”) are the lofty celestial kind of angel and are accompanied by a brightly lit aura called a “doxa.” It’s this latter sort that showed up in the dark of Bethlehem’s night. And any such appearance would surely frighten even the bravest of shepherds clear out of his sandals!

But their fear that night had a much deeper undertow. We need only to remember how harsh life was in the early years of the first century. The economic system was one of domination that favored the 1% and crushed the remaining 99%. [Does that sound familiar?] Poverty was the norm of the day, and the options to break that cycle were practically non-existent. The political strong arm of the Roman Empire was not the least bit concerned about anything but power. And it was getting worse as a census ordered by Caesar Augustus would provide the means necessary to tighten the controls even more.

So, that the scriptures tell us that they were filled with fear may be somewhat understated! Even more, to be afraid to the core like that, and then to hear “be not afraid” from an angel was not only welcomed as an assurance of something better to come, it was as a healing balm that virtually everyone needed for deliverance and hope.

Sometimes living under West Hartford’s sky is not all that different. Our setting is distinctive for sure, but the reality of being in and around a culture of fear still abounds. It comes close and we never need to look very far to find or feel it.

A colleague of mine writes of her granddaughter, Emma. Emma had a fear of the dark and she would go to her room at bedtime in dread. She would surround herself with stuffed animals to help her feel less afraid as she drifted toward sleep. This one night my friend went to tuck her in. After a brief time she stood to go back downstairs and she left the door opened thinking it would make her granddaughter more secure. But Emma spoke up, “Oma, why did you leave the bedroom door opened?” Before my friend could respond Emma said, “It’s not good to keep the door opened. There’s too much dark out there. You have to shut the door to keep out the dark.”²

I wonder: Do you ever feel that way? Like there’s too much dark out there? I sure do! Life as a pastor entrusts me with all kinds of conversations. I am humbled by the ways that you let me into your lives. And if I ever made count I would have to say that fear – along with its close cousin anxiety – tops the frequency list. The gamut runs wide: fears about the economy loom large . . . or about health care or jobs . . . or about resources for retirement or education . . . or about kids, or parents, or kids and parents at the same time . . . or about being lonely . . . or about losing love, or about finding our true place in the world.

Psychiatrist Smiley Blanton, one of the early voices in identifying the relationship between psychology and religion, was spot-on almost 75 years ago: “Fear and anxiety are among the greatest plagues in life and are the most subtle and destructive of all human diseases.”

But wait: here’s the best part of the story! Whether our fears are in the skies over Bethlehem or West Hartford the shepherds provide an antidote that we can rely on. They didn’t let fear paralyze them! They didn’t allow themselves to get or keep in the dark! No, they let go just enough to follow the angel’s instruction, and took it with them to the manger!

More directly: they took it to Jesus! Honestly, our fears and worries, our anxieties and uncertainties, take on a whole different perspective once we bring them to him. Kathleen Norris once wrote that “the birth of Jesus is the one place . . . the one place . . . where hope contends with fear.” That’s just it! And that contending goes on any time that our faith overrides that which is uncertain or frightful or anxious to us.

Henri Nouwen, spiritual giant of our time, once wrote: “Life can be unpredictable. We can be happy one day and sad the next, healthy one day and sick the next, rich one day and poor the next, alive one day and dead the next. So, where do we turn? What do we do? Who is there to hold on to? Who is there to feel secure with? Who is there to trust at all times?” And the Christmas answer, the best of all time, is Jesus!

One of my favorite authors, Frederick Buechner, puts it like this. Christmas is the invitation to take our lives to Jesus and to trust in this mystery of God-with-us. This cannot be imagined into being, rather, it must be experienced by doing. It becomes profoundly transformative. “A Christian is one who looks to Jesus and says, ‘I can’t prove a thing, but there’s something about his eyes and his voice. There’s something about the ways he carries his head, his hands, the way he carries his cross . . . and the way he carries me.’”

Let me leave it with this. If you set out to discover how many times the phrase “Be not afraid” occurs in the scriptures, you would find that it is repeated in almost every book in the Bible! It actually appears 365 times across the Hebrew and Christian scriptures.³

How perfectly convenient! That means that, if we so choose, we could take one of those readings as a Christmas gift each day of the year; one of those instances that would replace the fears that we have with something better like hope! We could undergird our anxious uncertainty with a word of faith! And all on account of an angel in the sky talking to shepherds in the dark!

This is a part of the eternal Christmas Message and Mystery, and I deeply believe that we can trust it with all of our hearts!

In the Living Spirit of Jesus. Amen.

© 2011 Charles Geordie Campbell, all rights reserved.

¹ George Buttrick, ed. The Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible Volume A-D. Abingdon Press, 1962, pp. 128 -135.

² The Rev. Martie McMane, Senior Pastor, First Congregational Church, Boulder, Colorado. Story as told in an unpublished sermon entitled “Fear Not”, December 24, 2009.

³ Google search, follow “Be not afraid” – frequency in the Bible, 2011.