

## **Fear Not!**

Luke 1:26-38

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent

11 29 2009 Sam Jones Memorial United Methodist Church

### **Introduction**

Today marks the beginning of a new year in the church calendar. November 29<sup>th</sup> is the first Sunday of the Advent Season. **Advent** literally means “*arrival*” or “*approach*.” It is the four week season before Christmas. During this time of preparation, we anticipate the celebration of Christ’s coming into the world.

During December, we will rehearse Matthew and Luke’s stories of the very first Christmas. From the start, the **angels** played an important role in announcing the arrival of the newborn king. Let us hear their heavenly message anew today.

### **I. Fear Not!**

“***Fear not!***” the angel said to Zechariah. Gabriel foretold that Zechariah and Elizabeth would have a child in their old age. His name would be John, and he would serve as God’s prophet, preparing the way for the coming of the Christ.

“***Fear not!***” the angel said to Mary. “*You have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus.*”

“***Fear not!***” the angel said to Joseph. “*Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.*”

“***Fear not!***” the angel said to the shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night. “*I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord!*”

Time and again the first words the angels spoke were “*Fear not!*” and “*Do not be afraid!*” Despite the angelic reassurances, Zechariah, Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds still trembled in fear. They were caught up in events far greater than their own lives. However, they obediently submitted to God’s will.

### **II. Fear**

“*Fear not.*” That’s easier for angels to say than humans to do. We live in a **world of fear**. There is always some new, looming threat on the near horizon.

In the 1960s, we feared a nuclear war between the United States and Russia. During air raid drills at school, the teachers told us to crouch under the desk, covering our heads with our hands—a surefire defense against an atomic bomb!

In the 1970s, Steven Spielberg’s movie, *Jaws*, made folk afraid to go into the water. During the 1980s, killer bees threatened to swarm across the United States. At the end of the 1990s, the world dreaded the Y2K bug. Today the H1N1 virus fills the news with fears of a worldwide pandemic.

**Fear** is a natural response to danger. Our bodies are hardwired for fear. In the face of a threat, we instinctively prepare for “*fight or flight*.” Adrenaline floods the

bloodstream, blood pools around the central organs, muscles contract, eyes widen, and awareness increases. And the danger does not have to be physical. We have the same physiological reaction to emotional, mental, relational, and spiritual threats.

In the comic strip, *Peanuts*, Linus visited his sister, Lucy, in her role as a nickel-a-visit psychiatrist. Clutching his security blanket while sucking his thumb, Linus moaned: “I’m in sad shape. My life is full of fear and anxiety . . . the only thing that keeps me going is this blanket. I need help!”

So Lucy attempted to help Linus identify his fear. “Are you afraid of responsibility? If you are, then you have hypengyophobia. How about cats? If you’re afraid of cats, you have ailurophobia. Are you afraid of staircases? If you are, then you have climacophobia. Maybe you have thalassophobia, this is a fear of the ocean or gephyrophobia, which is a fear of crossing bridges. Or perhaps you have pantophobia. Do you think you might have pantophobia?”

A totally confused Linus asked, “What’s pantophobia?”

Lucy explained: “The fear of everything.”

And Linus shouted, “THAT’S IT!” (*The Gospel according to Peanuts*, p. 64)

What do YOU fear? What specific, concrete danger threatens your life? Lucy was right in one respect—identifying what frightens us is the first step in dealing with fear.

Physical violence

Children

Jobs

Harm to loved ones

Parents

Finances

Marriage

Health

After identifying our fears, we then ask: “**Is my fear REAL?**” Oftentimes, we dread shadows rather than substance. We are like children who fear monstrous, midnight shadows; but in the morning we see they were cast by chairs and teddy bears.

Three cats reside at our home. The youngest is named **Squirrelly** in honor of her long, bushy tail; but the name could also describe her mental status. The cat is neurotic! She has developed an irrational fear of the monkey grass beside our deck. The crazed cat will sit and stare at the grass for hours. A loud noise or wind gust sends her into a panic.

I’m not sure how the phobia developed. My guess is she had an unpleasant encounter in the monkey grass with a possum or snake. Although the danger is long gone, Squirrelly continues to watch the tall grass for any threat.

It turns out that phobias and fears are contagious. When the other cats first saw Squirrelly’s behavior, Kitty Kate and Mary May would creep up beside her. I would look out the window and see all three staring into the monkey grass!

So often we fear what is not there. We anxiously fritter away today’s blessings over tomorrow’s concerns. However, most of our worries and anxieties never become realities. As one person put it: “*Don’t tell me that worry solves nothing—most of the things I’ve worried about never happened!*”

In Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of the Bible entitled “The Message,” Jesus said: “*Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and don’t get worked up*”

*about what may or may not happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes.” (Matthew 6: 34)* Burdening ourselves with yesterday’s failures and tomorrow’s worries is like loading one ton on a half-ton truck. One author wrote, *“Today is all I have, all I want, and all I can handle!”*

### **III. Human Response**

Of course, **perception** IS reality. Even when our fears are not real, we remain afraid. Assuring people afraid of heights that the glass elevators at the Waverly Hotel are perfectly safe will not cure their fear. People who fear snakes do not want to hold a garter snake even if they know it won’t hurt them. Fear is not rational because human beings are not always rational.

We also need to recognize that sometimes perception can become our own reality. At my first church out of seminary, I had a church member named Lizzie. She was a world-class hypochondriac. She had every medical condition known to medicine and took dozens of pills each day. She seldom moved out of her easy chair because of her condition. And sure enough, she eventually became too sick to move.

There ARE some **human responses** that we can make to fear. In fact, SOME fear can be healthy—it serves as a motivation to act. For example, concerns about theft can lead us to install deadbolt locks, motion-activated lights, and security systems. Worries over health might help us get regular checkups, eat right, and exercise. Anxiety about death could help us take out life insurance or write a will.

I recall a conversation with a woman who had severe back problems. If you’ve ever had chronic back issues, then you know how easy it is to become self-limiting. She said: *“I’m careful, but I do not live in fear.”* Part of our human response is to exercise prudent care without being ruled by a spirit of fear.

### **IV. Divine Response**

However, human response to fear can only carry us so far. We soon reach the point where we’ve done all that we can do. Much of what occurs in this world is beyond our control and influence. And while SOME fear can provide helpful motivation, TOO MUCH fear can be disabling. It robs us our past faith, present joy, and future hope.

Remember that the Christmas angels said: *“Fear not!”* Implicit in the declaration is also a promise that we need not fear. How does our **Christian faith** inform our fear?

#### **God with us**

Our faith reminds us that we do not face fear alone. One of the titles given to Jesus as his birth was *“Emmanuel”* which means *“God is with us.”* Sometimes God delivers us from trial and tribulation. Other times our Lord walks with us *“through the valley of the shadow.”*

A child was holding hands with his father as they walked down the street. Finally the boy said, “Daddy, you hold on to me for a while ‘cause I can’t hold on to you any more.” Christmas reminds us that God so loved the world that he gave us his Son, and our heavenly Father holds on to us now and forevermore.

1 John 4:18 says: *“There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear.”* The immediate context of this verse is the assurance that Christians need not fear the final judgment. However, the greater context of the passage describes God’s love driving out all fear from our lives.

### **Other with us**

We also experience God incarnate in the lives of others. There was a child who was afraid of the dark. Her parents assured her, “God is with you.” The child wisely answered, “I KNOW that God is with me, but I want someone with skin on them!”

The **church** is God “with skin on them.” Paul said that the church is *“the body of Christ.”* We are sons and daughters of God, brothers and sisters of Christ, and a part of God’s family. We need the church, and the church needs us.

### **God’s strength**

In the face of fear, we are also promised strength beyond our own. 1 John 4:4 declares: *“You dear children of God are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.”*

One of the great, New Testament affirmations of faith is found in Romans 8:37, 39: *“I am convinced . . . that nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

### **Eternal perspective**

The Holy Spirit also offers us the gift of eternal perspective. One benefit of growing older is the opportunity to cultivate a broader outlook on life. What a child sees as a world-ending disaster a more mature adult recognizes as a passing affliction.

The extreme expression of this worldview is expressed by the apostle Paul in Romans 8:18: *“I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”* *The Message* reads: *“That’s why I don’t think there’s any comparison between the present hard times and the coming good times.”*

### **Conclusion**

Garrison Keillor hosts *The Prairie Home Companion* on National Public Radio. He tells a story from his childhood about his “**Storm House.**” It occurred when he entered seventh grade and started taking the bus to school. His principal, Mr. Detman, was the kind of man who worried about everything . . . .

“He had his own winter fear—that a blizzard would sweep in and school buses would be marooned on the roads and children would perish.” In anticipation of such an event, bus rider was assigned a “Storm House.” In case a blizzard hit during school, the children would go to their storm houses rather than attempt to ride the bus home.

Keillor said: “My Storm Home was the Kloeckls’, an older couple who lived in a little green cottage down by the lake. I walked past many times just to look at my storm home . . . . The Kloeckls’ became very big in my imagination. In fact, I wanted to believe that I hadn’t just been assigned to the Kloeckls’—that they had come down to the school and picked me out of the crowd; ‘Him’ they told Mr. Detman. ‘In the event of a blizzard, we want that boy! The skinny one with the thick glasses!’

I often dreamed of walking up to the little green cottage and knocking on the door when things would get difficult . . . Mrs. Kloeckl would open the door and say, ‘Ah, it’s you. I knew you’d come some day. I’m so glad to see you. Come on in. Get out of those wet clothes. I’ll make you some hot chocolate. We’re so glad to have you . . . Carl, come down and see who’s in the kitchen!’

‘Is it our storm children?’

‘Yes, in the flesh, big as life.’

No blizzard came during the school hours that year. All the snowstorms were convenient evening or weekend ones, and I never got to stay with the Kloeckls’, but they were often in my thoughts. It was a place that I could go. I didn’t. I guess all my troubles were bearable. But my troubles were more bearable knowing what I knew: that my ‘storm house’ was there. When things got tough, I’d think, ‘There are the Kloeckls.’”

God’s people are never promised a storm-free life. It is a scary world, life’s fears can sometimes feel overwhelming. However, our Lord provides us with a “storm house” of refuge. Psalm 91 says: “*He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High, will rest in the shadow of the Almighty . . . He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge.*”

What do you fear today? Hear the words of the Christmas angels: “***Fear not!***”