

“Don’t Be Afraid”
Isaiah 61:1-4, 11; Luke 2:8-20
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This beloved part of the Christmas story is almost as good as standing by the manger itself and gazing down at the baby Jesus. Can’t you just imagine that crystal clear, dark night in the countryside watching the stars along with the shepherds who are working third shift, standing around the water cooler chatting. And suddenly an angel of the Lord swoops in and stands there in the middle of the group. Now I don’t think this angel is one of those chubby little cherub-like creatures we often see in Baroque paintings. Or even like Della Reese or Roma Downey from *Touched by an Angel*. I don’t know exactly what this angel may have looked like, but it must have scary because when the shepherds see it they are terrified. And the first words out the angel’s mouth are, “Don’t be afraid!” This is how, more often than not, angels in the Bible greet people when they meet them. So I’m thinking they looked terrifying.

Maybe they looked something like the ghosts or spirits who visit Ebenezer Scrooge on Christmas Eve. But those ethereal visitors never suggest that Scrooge shouldn’t be afraid. Instead they seem to want to scare him to death...or “scare him to new life.” Anyway, he was pretty darn terrified last week at the end of the Ghost of Christmas Present’s visit. And as that Ghost disappeared when the clock tolled twelve, Dickens wrote, Scrooge “beheld a solemn Phantom, draped and hooded, coming, like a mist along the ground, towards him. The Phantom slowly, gravely, silently approached. When it came, Scrooge bent down upon his knee; for in the very air through which this Spirit moved it seemed to scatter gloom and mystery.” We know this is the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, and the tour this time is all about death. Scrooge sees businessmen, scallywags, and paupers all laughing and giving thanks for some mean-spirited person’s passing. And then he sees a body covered with a pall lying on a bed, but he is unwilling to pull back the sheet to see the face. He must know that this is his own lonely, dreadful death he’s witnessing, but he’s not absolutely sure until he sees his name engraved on a neglected tombstone.

When he sees the words Ebenezer Scrooge, he cries out: "Spirit! Hear me. I am not the man I was.... Assure me that I yet may change these shadows you have shown me, by an altered life."

He promises: "I will honor Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year. I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future. The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons that they teach. Oh, tell me I may sponge away the writing on this stone!"

Holding up his hands in a last prayer to have his fate reversed, he watched as the Ghost’s hood and cloak shrink and collapse, and become his bedpost. When he awake he learns it is Christmas Day and he still has a chance to reform and redeem his life.

It turns out that Scrooge is even better than his word. “He became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man,” as the world ever knew. “Some people laughed to see the alteration in him, but he let them laugh, and little heeded them. His own heart laughed: and that was quite enough for him.”

The way *A Christmas Carol* unfolds, it appears that Scrooge repented, Scrooges changed in positive and generous ways because he was terrified of dying alone with no one to mourn his death. Maybe in the end that is what motivates him. But there was something else he feared when he was a younger man that twisted his life and turned it for the worse. In the scene when his fiancée, Belle, releases him from their engagement, she tells him that his love for her has been replaced by his love of money. He replies "There is nothing on which it is so hard as poverty; and there is nothing it professes to condemn with such severity as the pursuit of wealth!" In other words, his inordinate fear of being poor has become his overriding motivation in life.

"You fear the world too much," she answered, gently. "All your other hopes have merged into the hope of being beyond the chance of its sordid reproach. I have seen your nobler aspirations fall off one by one, until the master-passion, Gain, engrosses you."

I think probably one of the worst things about fear, about living your life in fear is that takes all our energy to work against what we're afraid of. It's what wakes us up in the middle of the night. It's what drives our daily decisions and our deeds. It traps us in regret about the past and/or anxiety about the future, denying/robbing us the ability to live fully in the present.

And even though biblical angels seem to get away with just telling people, "Don't be afraid," those words are never enough to calm and heal a truly frightened soul. And, in fact, the angels always follow up their "fear not" greeting with good news, good news about something God is doing or will do to address the pain and fears of the world. They bring words of hope and joy to displace the fear. As the verse in "O Little Town of Bethlehem" goes: "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."

This week Jessie Palatucci who works in the national office of the United Church of Christ posted a commentary on the UCC website. She wrote:

"This has been a dark season for many. Every time I look at a screen (and they are everywhere - in my hand, at my desk, on the side of buildings, at the bus stop) I am confronted by stories depicting vivid acts of hate.

Many of my friends and colleagues are increasingly fearful. They worry that they will come under attack because of the way they worship, the color of their skin, or who they love. And I can't tell them they're wrong to be afraid. Not in the face of mounting evidence on the evening news.

The weight of that knowledge makes me want to crawl into bed and stay there. It's so tempting to hide from all the ugliness. It's definitely better for my anxiety. But I find it's not really better for my heart. Shutting off the news and hiding my head under the covers doesn't make me feel better; it just makes me feel lazy. And maybe a little bit complicit.

So I've decided to take a different tack. I've decided to show up more and listen harder for signs of hope."

She goes on to talk about having conversations with people from different political persuasions for the first time in a long time, and “discovering that they too are feeling bewildered and concerned about increasing attacks on the rights of women, refugees, and people of different faiths. This,” she says, “is a good place to begin the work of making a better world.” She’s doing that by becoming involved in local politics, writing letters to her city council members, and trying to be more intentional with how she spends her time. She is giving priority to the things that are life-giving, for herself and her community. Showing up for wonderful moments in her friends’ and family’s lives, while also making time for “the meetings and planning we’ll need to do to prepare for the challenges ahead.”

She ends her article by quoting a famous line from Wendell Berry’s 1991 poem, *Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front*: “Be joyful though you have considered all the facts.”

That’s such a great poem and so appropriate not only for our time, but for Mr. Scrooge as well, that I feel compelled to read more...but not all...of it:

Love the quick profit, the annual raise,
vacation with pay. Want more
of everything ready-made. Be afraid
to know your neighbors and to die.
And you will have a window in your head.
Not even your future will be a mystery
any more. Your mind will be punched in a card
and shut away in a little drawer.
When they want you to buy something
they will call you. When they want you
to die for profit they will let you know.

So, friends, every day do something
that won’t compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it.
Denounce the government and embrace
the flag. Hope to live in that free
republic for which it stands.

A little later comes this:

Expect the end of the world. Laugh.
Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful
though you have considered all the facts.”

When the angel swooped in and stood in the middle of that group of shepherds they were terrified. And then the angel said, “Don’t be afraid. **I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.** A Savior has just been born in Bethlehem. Go and see for yourselves. This is

what you're to look for: a baby wrapped in a blanket and lying in a manger." And they went. And somehow they saw in the face of the baby the Messiah, the one the prophet Isaiah predicted, the one who came filled with the Spirit to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to announce freedom to all captives and to pardon all prisoners, to comfort those who mourn; to give them bouquets of roses instead of ashes, messages of joy instead of news of doom, and courageous joy-filled hearts, instead of fearful, faint spirits.

This is the good news of Christmas, meant for you, for me, for the whole world so that we might not live as fearful, fretful people, but instead be filled with the Spirit of Love and Laughter, Hope and Courage, so that we might work together to make a better world for everyone. A world where no one lives in poverty, no one lives with violence, no one lives in fear. Instead we able to live our lives filled with joy.