

FEAR NOT

Imagine being alone in your room maybe reading a book or listening to the radio or just watching the birds eating at a bird feeder or squirrels chasing one another around the yard. You sit and smile and are relaxed then it happens. Out of the quiet of the day comes a voice. That voice startles you. “Don’t be afraid. God is with you.” You look around to find no one, but the voice comes again and this time you know it is meant for you. “Mary, God has found favor with you. He has a mission for you. You have been blessed. He wants you to be the mother of his Son who will come to bring peace, hope, and salvation to the world.”

How would you have felt? Amazed? Shocked? Frightened? If God spoke to you today through an angel perhaps you would jump right out of your pew. Never mind pew. Right out of your skin!

Have you ever been afraid? As children one is often afraid of the dark. As parents you try and calm that startled child by telling them not to be afraid because you are right within shouting distance. That assurance allows that child to close his or her eyes in order to sleep knowing they need not be afraid because someone is nearby that will protect them. Isn’t that what our God does?

Fears! We all have them. Because of a childhood prank I’ve been afraid, mesmerized, fascinated by of all things, snakes, big and small, poisonous and harmless ones. That fear has not gone away, but I’ve learned to deal with it mainly because I stay away from them. In Paris II when I was visiting one of the parishioners outside their house she showed me a long snake skin about 10-12 feet long from a snake that was shedding. I said I didn’t know they had a snake. She said it was a big one that they kept in a fish tank. I said I had never seen it when I visited their home, was it something new. She said oh no they had it for a long time. It was right behind the couch that I always sat

on but they often kept it covered. I think my jaw dropped open. She then showed me pictures of this huge python snake dangling over the shower rod taking a bath with one of her grandkids. It made me a little nervous the next time I went there, but never did see it. I always prayed, “Lord watch over me on this visit and help me not show fear.” Maybe that was not the prayer but you get the idea.

There are people who fear heights. Others have fears of closed in places. There are those who have other fears, such as stocking up on things afraid they will run out of food or essentials. They become pack rats. Some are afraid of death.

In the Bible fear is used in many ways and often falls into two categories. Fear can be either friend or an alarm system. One Scripture we can use is this, “The fear of the Lord is my strength.” That’s a good fear. It’s that type of fear knowing you don’t have to be afraid of God but that you are to be in awe of Him. To Abraham God said “Fear not I am with you. Take your family and go where I lead you.” To Elijah he said tell the woman who was running out of oil and flour in a time of famine to fear not, for as long as Elijah is with them, God will make sure her supplies will last. In Isaiah we read, “So do not fear for I am with you. Be not dismayed, for I am your God.” Jesus said in Matthew’s gospel, “Don’t be afraid you are worth more than many sparrows.”

It should not be with too much surprise that today’s music bringing us back to Bethlehem tells us about God’s assurances for Mary and Joseph not to fear. A young couple with news that they would be the earthly parents of God’s Son, who would believe them? And how would they do it? What could Joseph teach God’s son? And Mary? Who knows what she was thinking.

As we walk this journey of faith maybe through all the shopping and bustle of Christmas there are some fears of our own that we need to deal with. Fears of loneliness’. Fears of not much money to spend. Fears of what the future holds. Oh yes, these fears are very, very real. Maybe this morning the angel’s voice is for someone here

as we listen to the Christmas story, the challenges made to Mary and Joseph. Let's listen in.

“Fear not,” the angel told Mary. *“For 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.”*

You talk about fear. Mary had her fears of being snubbed because she was not married and pregnant. Joseph had his fears of being slighted because of the same reason. They could be the talk of the town. Their marriage had been set, what was he to do? Should he cast her aside? Was she unfaithful? What a dilemma. Two people's lives getting ready to be turned upside down. The joy of wedding planning to this? Mary had to tell an unsuspecting Joseph of her pregnancy by the Holy Spirit of God. It was hard for her to conceive the idea, much less try to convince Joseph that if he still wanted to marry her, she would. If he wanted to cast her aside it was okay. She may have told him, it's all in the hands of God. She told him she would carry God's Son, the Savior of the world, “Our Savior” she might have told Joseph. But when Joseph heard the news his mind wasn't on the child but on the act that it took. How could she? And so a disgruntled Joseph left Mary in order to make a decision. But in a dream God spoke to his heart. “It's going to be okay Joseph. Don't be afraid, I'll be with you every step of the way. Fear not take Mary for your wife.”

Crazy isn't it. Two people's lives changed forever. When they came together again and Joseph reached out to Mary I'm sure he had some questions. She too, had questions. But she had come to grips with the fact that God was going to handle not only Joseph but the whole birth of his son.

“Fear not!” are words we hear in Scripture to remind us never to be afraid. Daniel was tossed into the lion's den for praying to his God and not to the king. Perhaps God told him to ‘fear not I am with you.’ The next morning when they checked Daniel the lions were keeping him warm. Perhaps the 3 Hebrew children heard God's voice to ‘fear not’ when they were being tossed into the fiery furnace for not worshipping the

king. Even though they turned up the heat as far as it could go. When the king got close enough to look he saw 4 men, not three, and they were sitting chatting with one another. When he shut down the furnace the 3 came out with no ill effects, and didn't have a scratch on them. Faith is the opposite of fear. The Hebrew kids told the king do what he wanted they were not afraid for their God was with them.

“Fear not!” a walking on water Jesus tells his disciples as he approaches the boat after they had struggled all night with a storm. Scripture reminds those whom God speaks to ‘fear not for he is with us.’ A young shepherd boy confronts a giant with just a slingshot and says, “Your toast, Goliath, for I'm not afraid of you. My God is with me.” And he defeats the giant and Israel rejoices for they are free.

Isn't that one of the meanings of Christmas? Once again we are reminded by John that Jesus came ‘to dwell among us.’ Could it be that he came so we would fear not? Oh, yes, Mary and Joseph struggled just like anyone else. We read how God protected Mary, Joseph and Jesus. “Fear not!” came the words. Should not those words assure us that in our struggles, on our journey of faith we need not fear for that same God who was with them is with us today?

We heard other words today that remind us that God is with us today in our fears. Dorothy said, “In the midst of all the celebrations, are there fears and worries which keep you from experiencing the presence of God and joy of Christmas?”

Look around at our world today and think about some who are facing fears. Our troops who serve overseas face the fear of death as they battle the enemy. Some who have no job ask the question how are they going to support their family? How can they pay their mortgage or rent? How are they going to feed their families much less buy Christmas presents? For some it is difficult when a job doesn't come, or money runs out, and there are no gifts to be had for their kids and the cupboard is bare. For we who are okay it may not be bad, but think of those who are homeless living in shacks, in shelters, or even in cars. Yes, at this time of year we hear their stories and many respond

by giving a little extra and that's great. But how about after Christmas, after the new year, week after week as some in this world have little hope? The other night on TV they talked with families living in cars and trucks and kids washing up each morning for school at a gas station because mom and dad lost their jobs and can't find one to afford rent or staying in a motel, even a cheap one. Can they understand God's words are for them as well, not to fear that he is with them? Do they hear the sounds of Christmas? Do they have joy and peace that only our Savior can give? Pretty tough when your future looks bleak.

I wish I had the answers, but I don't. But God does. And that's why we need to listen with our hearts. The miracle of Christmas is this....we don't have to be afraid....for God is with us. We may have next to nothing or we may have plenty, but God is with us. We might be lonely or depressed because of something that has happened in our lives, but God is with us. So my friends, don't look down, but look heavenly and hear the words of the angel to Mary, to Joseph "Fear not! For God is with you."

Let's return to Bethlehem where Christ was born and remember he dwells among us and we never have to fear for he is always with us. We need to be able to stop, look and listen. Stop being in such a hurry. Stop worrying all the time. Look up and see God. Listen to his voice to fear not. Listen as he says 'I am with you.' Listen to the message of Christmas that the Savior has been born. Look to the manger as the shepherds' and wise men bow in humble adoration giving their gifts, yet receiving their gift of grace and mercy and forgiveness and salvation. Listen to the Christmas story that unto us a child was born who is called Christ the king. Listen to the words proclaimed, "Fear not! For I am with you."

The choir sang, "The Lord is my light and my salvation of whom shall I be afraid? The Lord is my strength, the Lord is my life of whom shall I be afraid? Fear not, the Lord is with you."

Yes, fear not. Miracles happens. God is with us.

On this communion Sunday as you wait your turn at his table speak to God. Give him your fears. Let them go. Fears of your tomorrows. Fears of your today's. Whatever fears you have release them. As you receive him today through the elements of communion hear his words of assurance, "Fear not! For I am with you."