

Rev. Karen Graham – Church of the Redeemer
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“Fear Not!”

Luke 1: 26-38; Isaiah 35: 1-10; Matthew 1: 18-21

Consider these people and these situations from the Bible:

- *Hagar in the wilderness with her son Ishmael
- *Moses leading the Hebrews out of Egypt
- *Joshua leading the Hebrews in battle
- *David running in fear from King Saul
- *Isaiah speaking to King Ahaz
- *Jeremiah’s call to be a prophet
- *Jeremiah consoling Israel
- *Daniel’s vision
- *Zechariah receiving the news that he and Elizabeth will be parents
- *Mary’s conversation with Gabriel
- *Joseph hearing about Mary’s conversation
- *The shepherds outside Bethlehem
- *The disciples seeing Jesus walk on the water
- *The women at the empty tomb
- *Paul in Corinth defying the Roman authorities

What do all these situations have in common?

In each one of them, either an angel of the Lord, or God himself, or a prophet, or Jesus speaks these words: “Fear not. Do not be afraid.”

“Fear not.” An escape from slavery. Crossing the Red Sea. Fighting holy wars. Conquering other nations. Entering the promised land. Returning from exile. Rebuilding the temple. Expecting a baby. Witnessing the birth of the Messiah. Seeing the risen Christ. Preaching the word. Storms. Battles. Uncertainties. Failures. Surprises. Hostility. Defeat. New beginnings. Death. Resurrection. In all kinds of

circumstances, in all kinds of situations and throughout the ages, God has said to God's people, "Fear not."

When have you been afraid? I'll tell you about some of my fears. When I had spinal meningitis a number of years ago and was in the hospital emergency room waiting for the doctors to decide what was wrong with me, I wasn't afraid. I really wasn't. The pain in my head and neck was so severe I couldn't think about being afraid. I remember telling myself that if I died at least my headache would go away. So I wasn't afraid then. But fear did set in several weeks later. When the horrible pain was gone, but a lingering achiness and weariness and confusion in my head stayed behind. I told myself I should be feeling better, but I still didn't feel quite right, and there were a number of nights when panic seized hold of me, when my mind was gripped by fear. Fear of dying? No. But a fear that I was never going to feel like me again. That the fog in my head was never going to clear, that the tingling kind of motion in my brain was never going to stop, that the tiredness would never go away. I knew what the doctors told, that all this just took time, but still I was afraid. And I couldn't sleep. And my heart pounded.

I get afraid when I have to drive on slippery, icy roads by myself.

When our family went camping, I was afraid to get out of my tent at night and walk to the restroom when I knew there were bears in the campground.

I went downhill skiing once -- and I haven't been on a sled in years -- I am afraid of losing control and not being able to stop without crashing and hurting myself.

When I was experiencing deep sadness and sorrow, I feared I would never be happy again.

I was afraid when my parents said goodbye to me and drove the 250 miles home, leaving me on my own for the very first time as a freshman in college. Would anyone like me? Would I make new friends? Would the classes be too hard?

I am apprehensive every Sunday before I come to church. Who am I to think I can preach the word of God?

Some fears are trivial. Some are serious. Some can be conquered through willpower and determination and practice and experience. But some fears can't be overcome by our own power. Some fears have to be turned over to God – and sometimes all of us – no matter how competent, capable, or successful or together we are, need to hear God's reassuring words once again, "Fear not. Do not be dismayed. For I am with you. Be not afraid."

It's a different sort of Christmas greeting, isn't it? We're more accustomed to words like Hope and Peace and Joy and Love. We think of angels singing Gloria in excelsis deo, and alleluia. We think of a star shining brightly. But Courage? Have you ever seen courage Christmas decorations? Have you ever driven down a street that has banners hanging down from the street lamps which read: "Happy Holidays -- Fear Not!"

But – fear is real isn't it? So maybe the angels' announcements to Mary and Joseph and the shepherds are just the sort of Christmas message we all need to hear after all, "Do not fear. Be not afraid."

We know that Israel was afraid the exile would never be over. Israel was afraid to hope for a future. Had God abandoned them forever? But Isaiah declares: "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom." Isaiah tells of that promised day when Zion will be restored, and all creation will be transformed. "Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God . . . He will come and save you."

We know that Mary was afraid of the angel's startling announcement. What do you mean, I am God's favored one? "I am to be the mother of the Messiah?" I am just a girl. I'm not even married yet. And to a frightened young girl the angel says, "Do not be afraid, Mary."

We know that Joseph was afraid of all the ramifications if he went ahead and married his pregnant fiancée. Such things just weren't done. So he made plans to break off the engagement quietly – without causing too much trouble to either him or Mary. But in a dream an angel of the Lord appeared and said, "Joseph, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife."

And we know those shepherds watching their flocks by night were afraid of the angel's glory -- of the blinding light that shone all around them. Here they were out in the fields doing what shepherds always do, and all of a sudden, out of nowhere, the heavenly host start singing? But the angel says, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I am bringing you good news of great joy to all the people; to you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord."

What happened after the angels left? Mary sang her beautiful song -- "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior." Mary accepted God's plan for her and she became the mother of the Lord. Joseph married Mary -- and ignored all the whispers and stares and even though the timing was off, he came home from Bethlehem the proud father of a baby boy. The shepherds didn't just stand on the hillside with their mouths open -- no -- they went to Bethlehem, saw the mother and child, and then left to go and tell everyone what they had heard and seen.

The angels gave each one of them courage. The courage to be faithful. The courage to do the right thing. The courage to take risks. The courage to proclaim God's good news.

And what is that good news? That all our worries are relieved? That all our troubles are gone? That all our problems are solved? No -- the good news for us as we get one week closer to the manger is that we can approach the manger in Bethlehem as we are -- with all our hopes as well as with all our fears -- and that the One who has come to live and dwell among us can meet those hopes and fears. Not matter how troubled our lives, or how torn up the world is, Jesus -- Emmanuel -- is with us. To calm our fears and to fulfill our hopes. To comfort us in our hurting. To guide us when we are lost.

The courage we receive from the prophets and angels and Jesus is not the kind of courage that tells us to knuckle down, take charge, and just do it. Instead, it's the courage to put our lives in God's hands. The courage to trust the Lord. The courage to go about our days doing justice and loving kindness and showing mercy. The courage to love others as we are loved. The courage to accept God's acceptance of us -- and the courage to be faithful. The courage to come to Bethlehem as we are, not as we'd like to be, not as we pretend to be, not as we want others to think we are, but as we truly are -- and know that the Savior we greet on Christmas Day is the savior of all the world, and that he come us to save us -- as we are.

You know, when Jesus was born things weren't so great for the people of his time. Jesus was born into a bloody, repressive, confused, and frightened world. The government was oppressive. Most people lived in extreme poverty. Terror lived in many hearts. It was not a safe, all is happy and bright kind of world at all. Still, the baby was born. Still he made a difference. And he still does. The baby Jesus doesn't need our protection. We don't have to approach Christmas afraid to admit the cruel realities of our lives, or to share with him the deepest fears of our hearts. Because that's why Jesus was born. That's why God's word was made flesh and came to dwell among us. So that those fears could be calmed. And those cruelties transformed. And those sins forgiven. And that darkness illuminated. And that oppression lifted.

"Fear not," say the angels. The Savior who is coming is strong enough to take all the turmoil and all the cruelty and all the ugliness in our world and in our lives. The Savior who is coming will, in truth, redeem all that. He will make light shine in the darkness. And he will bring joy to all the people.

"Fear not." Approach Christmas with courage. The courage to come to Christ as you are -- with your hopes and your fears, your joys and your disappointments, your goodness and your sinfulness, all mixed together. For the Savior who is coming, and whose birth we are anticipating, beckons each one of us to his side -- that he might touch our ordinary lives with his grace, and redeem us, and our world, with his love.

So, courage, friends! Fear not!

