

“Do not be afraid.”

Have you ever noticed that angels – messengers of God – tend to say that right before turning someone’s life upside down?

Look at the shepherds in the story just heard.

Going about their business, keeping watch over their flock by night.

In the stillness of the night something happened –

something shone before them – that they’d never seen before.

How could they not be terrified?

You have to wonder if the sheep weren’t a little skittish too.

“Do not be afraid,” says the angel out in the field that night.

Even though that angel came bearing “good news of great joy for all the people,” she begins by telling them not to be afraid.

I wonder, was that lone angel herself a little cowed by the stupendous errand on which she’d been sent?

You know that saying, “safety in numbers”;

soon, the angel is joined by a multitude, a heavenly host,

such that the shepherds are emboldened to go see for themselves.

This whole saga of the birth of Jesus told by St. Luke begins with an angel – Gabriel, by name – visiting a young woman named Mary.

Gabriel’s first words to her? “Do not be afraid.”

Brave and faithful as we know Mary to be,

how could she have not felt trepidation in that moment?

The mission Gabriel described could not have been the life she imagined for herself.

But Gabriel reassures her, “Do not be afraid.”

And Joseph? Who would relish beginning a family under such circumstances?

“Do not be afraid.”

Even the innkeeper. Just how comfortable could he have been

turning away the young couple,

letting an unknown woman give birth in his barn?

“Do not be afraid.”

That short sentence is one of the most common in all of scripture. I've not personally counted, but I read somewhere that it occurs 365 times in the Bible. Now even if that's not a precise count, there's a certain comfort in thinking that Holy Scripture allows that we need to be reminded, *every day*, not to be afraid.

In many of these instances, it's – you guessed it – a messenger of God about to turn someone's life upside down. About to tell someone to do something outrageous for God and this world God so loves. But first, they offer a simple word of assurance: Do not be afraid.

For all the kindly words spoken by those angels hundreds of times in Scripture, the clearest and most eloquent invitation to not be afraid is God's Word made flesh, Jesus. In Jesus, God not only tells God's people "Do not be afraid" but *shows* them how this can be. Jesus, God's Word made flesh, experiences every fear, every uncertainty, every everything, we humans will ever know, and still says, "Do not be afraid."

Jesus knows just how hard it is for us to not be afraid, but asks us to do it anyway, promising that he'll be there with us, accompanying us, through our fear.

In her message about the Christmas star, Miss Frances said that even this year – this year of pandemic and disruption and disappointment – the true message of Christmas that Jesus is born into this world remains the same. And of course she is right.

But it is also true that the Incarnation teaches that God in Christ comes to us and speaks to us exactly and uniquely where we are. And where many of us are this year is afraid. Afraid for our health, for our loved ones.

Afraid for our country, for what the future may hold.  
After so many months of relative isolation,  
afraid of being afraid.  
Afraid – of whatever is buried deep within, that keeps you up at night.

There's a reason those angels begin, "Do not be afraid."  
Because so often we are.

Like the shepherds and the sheep.  
Like the innkeeper. Like Joseph. Mary.  
And maybe even the angels themselves.  
Sometimes, we are afraid.  
Being afraid is a part of this life, part of who we are.

But so is Jesus. Born to share this life with us.  
Born to show us how to live and especially how to love.  
Born to uphold us when we are afraid,  
and urge us to keep going,  
keep putting one foot in front of the other  
even though our knees be shaking.

Jesus is born to turn our lives in directions we can't imagine.  
To turn our lives toward others,  
to help them not be so afraid.

For see – we have received good news of great joy for all the people,  
all creation:  
Jesus is born.  
God is with us. God is with us, even now.

"Do not be afraid."

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