

Proper 7A: 6/25/23
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“Be not afraid.”

Throughout scripture, that’s usually the first word out of the mouth of an angel.

Good thing, too, for an angelic encounter is most certainly a life-altering event...

A young unmarried girl named Mary learns that she’s about to have a baby.

Years later, shell-shocked women are confronted in the empty tomb of their crucified friend.

Centuries before that, ordinary “stiff-necked” people – from Moses to Isaiah to Jeremiah from whom we heard today – are called into God’s service.

Most greeted by the saying “Be not afraid.”

Not such a bad thing to hear even during lesser times of transition . . .

like, I dunno, maybe a last Sunday with a familiar priest or one’s last week before retirement?

Fortunately, today we’ve heard it straight from Jesus himself.

“Be not afraid,” he says three times in today’s gospel, describing what it means to be a **disciple** --

one who listens and learns – and lives -- according to Jesus’ teachings.

Today’s passage is part of a longer section of Matthew’s gospel, begun last week, known as the missionary discourse.

Jesus is teaching the disciples what it will be like

to go out into the world sharing his teaching with others.

Sometimes it will be divisive, taking a stand with Jesus.

Sometimes you’ll have to give up something important in order to find something better.

Being a disciple isn’t always easy, but *be not afraid* anyway.

Be not afraid, Jesus tells his disciples.

We’re here today as living proof that they heeded Jesus’ word.

Stumbling and bumbling as they were,

those early disciples managed to pass along the teachings of Jesus.

We ourselves are heirs of their discipleship.

Now it's for us, in our own stumbling bumbling way,
not to be afraid to pass it along to others.
Even in a time of change and uncertainty, be not afraid.

After all, fourteen years ago a group of St. Paul's folks
on a Search Committee decided to take a chance on calling *me* here.
"Wallingford Church Greet's First Female Rector" screamed a banner headline
on the front-page of the Record-Journal.
I wonder how many of you sat anxiously in the pews that first Sunday
wondering who you were about to meet.

At an Ingathering service one September a couple of years later,
I'd scattered little fuzzy-wuzzy pom-poms of various sizes and colors
throughout the pews.
The gospel was about finding lost sheep, and I'd devised an intergenerational,
interactive way for us to wander around during the sermon
finding someone with a fuzzy similar to ours

I was more nervous than I wanted to let on. Would people do it –
actually move out of their pews? Talk to each other?
Would they "get" it?

It turned out better than I'd hoped.
But the highlight was later, at the picnic, when dear Kathy Swenson
cornered me to say how much she enjoyed it.
"Oh, good," I said, "I wasn't sure people would actually do it."
"Dee Anne," she replied, with a twinkle in her eye,
"we're getting used to you."

Thank you for getting used to me – and letting me get used to you.
Thank you for engaging even when you were wary.
Thank you for rolling with it when we rearranged the liturgy
to do things like process outside to give out water bottles and sing hymns
for the Autism Walk or Turkey Trot, or even just to plant flowers.
Thank you for heeding the call to care about this world God so loves
by *showing up* at events out in the community and *taking up* collections
to aid folks from Ukraine to Nicaragua to right here close to home.

Thank you for going along on the ride when I play dress up and

preach as biblical characters. Thank you for laughing at my jokes (sometimes).
 Thank you for looking, as we did most recently on Trinity Sunday,
 at pictures and visual expressions of faith that may be foreign to you.
 Thank you for sharing your birthdays, anniversaries and life's milestones.
 Thank you for letting me convince you that Way of Love words
 are a part of the liturgy (and for letting me hear about it when I dare forget them).
 Thank you (as Episcopalians!) for opening up the Bible to study in church.
 Thank you for listening for God's word in the form of poetry.
 Thank you for sitting in silence in community.

And thank you for opening up yourselves to discover
 that we are church wherever we are – on walks in the woods,
 the North Lawn, the livestream,
 going about our daily business in the world as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Thank you for letting me teach (some of) you a new vocabulary word:
liminal, meaning a threshold,
 neither here nor there but
 betwixt and between
 who and where we once were and who and where we're yet to be.

And now I'll tell you the wide open secret:
 It's all about not being afraid.
 Not being afraid to try something new.
 Not being afraid to let God "do a new thing" among us.
 Not being afraid to think theologically –
 and not just think, but create and explore and *live theologically*.
 Not to be afraid to look for God's presence and power and,
 most of all, love
 whatever we're looking at
 wherever we find ourselves.
 This is a skill that will serve you well, O disciples of Jesus at St. Paul's,
 throughout this transition, and indeed all of life.
 You, by God's grace, are more equipped than you realize.

"What do you think you'll be getting if you call me here as rector?"
 I asked that Search Committee years ago during our final interview
 in the old, pre-renovated Common Room.
 I wrote down some of their answers and have carried them with me

in my notebook at most every meeting since.

It's a bit weather-beaten by now, but I can still read it as I have from time to time over the years.

Curious how they answered my question?

"Innovative" "Collaborative" "Real" "Humorous but reverent."

I told them that those were all things to which I could at least aspire.

I'll leave it to you to discern if and how I've lived up to those high hopes.

But here is something I can assure you with confidence.

In my first letter to the parish, appearing in a newsletter

before most of you had met me, I promised that I would love you.

And I have.