

**Christmas, Year "B":** Isaiah 9:2-4,6-7; Psalm 96:1-4,11-12; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14(15-20)

**Title:** Be Not Afraid

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As I began to think about what I might say here on this occasion, I thought to go back and re-read and to take a fresh look at the Christmas story. And so, I found myself not only reading the text that is prescribed for this day – but I read the first two chapters of Luke's Gospel in their entirety. And let me tell what I saw there. I saw there one whom the text refers to as "the Angel of the Lord" saying not once, not twice, but three times, "Be not Afraid."

In the first instance we see Zechariah, husband of Elizabeth, who, as priest, was alone in the sanctuary offering incense when there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, and the angel says to Zechariah, "Be not afraid." [*Luke Chapter 1, verse 9.*]

Again, in Chapter 1, an angel of the Lord appears yet again, but this time it is to Mary who is betrothed to one Joseph. And the angel says to Mary, "Be not afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." And the angel tells Mary that she is to be the bearer of God's only Son. (*Luke Chapter 1, 30–32 ff*),

And then in Chapter 2 we find an angel of the Lord appearing to shepherds who are attending to their flock in the fields and the text says that the Angel of the Lord appeared to them and they were terrified. And the angel says to them, "Do not be afraid; for see – "I am bringing you good news of great joy...." (*Luke 2:8-14*)

Well, I read these first two chapters of Luke's Gospel and I tell you that I began to ponder this – that is to say I realized that it is hard not to notice that, through his heavenly representatives, God is repeatedly saying to his people, "Be not afraid." In each account, the encounter with the Holy begins with the comforting words, "Be not afraid." And I began to ponder this thing. And I began to wonder what it was that the angels in these stories were encouraging us to not be afraid of. And I began to imagine that it is this: Be not afraid of the power of God to enter your spirit, to enter into your being and change your heart.

We might remind ourselves that Adam entered the world with a pure heart – a pure heart that he allowed to be compromised by his disobedience. But we also know that at another point in history there comes on to the scene one Jesus of Nazareth whom some will later refer to as the "Second Adam." And why would anyone refer to Jesus as the Second Adam? It is because as the first Adam was to be the progenitor of human beings on this earth, Jesus, the Second Adam was to be the progenitor of a redeemed world. Jesus' purpose, Jesus' mission was and is to forgive sins and to encourage all of humanity in the direction of a changed heart.

And as it is given us in the Christian story, it was on this night that God came into the world, in the flesh, in the person of this new born babe.

And so, I began to wonder what those who had preceded us might have had to say about this notion of God's presence in the world, to say about this babe who for the moment sleeps in a manger but who will later burst back onto the scene to speak to us and to show us what Godly love looks like. To say to us how it is we are to live, and move, and have our being.

And I noticed anew that following Jesus' death but before his ascension into heaven we once again find heavenly beings saying to those who seek or encounter this Jesus to "Be not afraid." And it occurred to me that whether these words are said explicitly as we find in some texts or whether they are implied, they are always there – Be not afraid.

And I began to wonder if others had thought about the importance, even the primacy of these words within the context of our common faith. And so I went on a search and here is what I found.

I found a treatise by one Dean Alan Jones wherein he writes that the Christmas message is deceptively simple. It is God's 'I love you' to the human race. And it is God's invitation to embrace and replicate the invitation to love by loving God in return and by loving all of God's children as an expression of who we are in Christ Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

And I found one Rose Marie Berger writing in *Sojourners* magazine that we lean into the Christmas story because we need an incarnation more powerful than the hell of newspaper headlines.<sup>2</sup>

And I found one Meister Eckhart, German theologian, philosopher, and mystic of the late 13<sup>th</sup> and early 14<sup>th</sup> century who is reported to have said, "What good is it to me if Mary is full of grace and I am not also full of grace? What good is it to me for the creator to give birth to this Son if I do not also give birth to him in my time and my culture."<sup>3</sup>

And I found Barbara Brown Taylor concluding an article that was published in *The Christian Century* saying of the Christmas season "that with all its trappings and all its busy-ness, God is in the midst of all of it, still hunting new flesh in which to be born."<sup>4</sup>

Then there is this excerpt from a sermon entitled "A Christmas Sermon on Peace" written and delivered by an Alabama Baptist preacher in 1967. Then and there the preacher said, "If there is to be peace on earth and good will towards men, we must finally believe in the ultimate reality of the universe and believe that all morality hinges on moral foundations. [*I embrace the vision*] that one day war will come to an end and that men will indeed beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. [Is 2:4] [*I anticipate with great joy*] the day when nations will no longer rise up against nations; neither will they study war any more [Micha 34:3]. [*I am banking*

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<sup>1</sup> Dean Alan Jones, "The Liturgical Year," in *Episcopal Life* (Dec. 1991, p. 18, as found in *Synthesis*, Dec 25, 2002 edition.

<sup>2</sup> Rose Marie Berger, *Sojourners*, January 2004, as included in *Synthesis*, December 25, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Meister Eckhart as reported in *Synthesis*, Dec. 25, 2006

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor as reported in *Synthesis*, Dec. 25, 2015

on it] that the prophet Isaiah was right when he said that one day the lion and the lamb will lie down together [Is 11:6] and every [person] will sit under their own vine and fig tree and none shall be afraid. [Is 40:4].

I have hope today that every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill will be made low, the rough places will be made smooth and the crooked places straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together. And I have a dream that along with all the prophets who have ever spoken on behalf of a God-inspired, progressive and ever expanding good will that with this kind of faith we will be able to adjourn the councils of despair and bring new light into the dark chambers of pessimism. I have a dream that with this faith we will be able to speed up the day when there will be peace on earth and good will toward men. It will be a glorious day; the morning star will sing together and the sons of God will shout for joy.<sup>5</sup>

My friend Suzanna Metz, Professor of Theology at the University of the South put it this way. She said, “our story will be more easily heard and faith more [easily known] if we examine what is in our own hearts.”<sup>6</sup>

I end with an expression of this same most worthy of theologies, but this time once again from the pen of Meister Eckhart whom I quoted earlier. With the nativity clearly in sight, that is to say with the theology of incarnation in mind. With the reality that the whole point of Jesus’ birth was to give rise to the birthing of changed hearts, he says:

Pay attention to exactly where this birth takes place:  
This eternal birth takes place in the soul  
totally in the manner in which it takes place in eternity.  
Neither more nor less  
There is only one birth  
And this birth takes place in the being  
And in the ground and the core of the soul.<sup>7</sup>

Dear ones, the prophets all, beseech us to be not afraid.  
Jesus beseeches us to be not afraid  
The cosmos calls out to us saying – be not afraid

Be not afraid to be loved or to love  
Be not afraid to live or to die,  
Be not afraid to trust in and believe in the wisdom of your hearts.

That, I believe, is the meaning of this most blessed event that we celebrate on this most holy of nights.

Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Christmas Sermon on Peace* (1967), as reported in *Synthesis*, 2015

<sup>6</sup> *Synthesis*, Dec. 25, 2015

<sup>7</sup> *Synthesis*, Dec. 25, 2005