

Sermon: Do not be Afraid Christmas Eve 2021 Luke 2:1-20
Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa ON Rev. Steve Clifton

Standing in a grocery store line up a while ago I watched as a toddler in front of me tried to get her mother's attention. Her mother was concentrating on her conversation with the cashier. The little girl said: "Mama Mama Mama Mama Mama" repeating Mama over and over. After about 20 "Mama's" the little girl had her mother's attention: "*I love you Mama...*" she said a message that no mother would want to miss.

The little girl knew that repeating a word or phrase is a good way to get someone's attention. Advertisers, educators, coaches, parents, and toddlers all use the power of repetition to capture attention or to push an important message home. Scripture does this too...

Do you know what the most repeated Biblical phrase is?

It's found in both Old and New Testaments.

The phrase is repeated 350 times.

It's "Do not be afraid." "Fear Not." "Don't be afraid"

Perhaps we are fearful people. At least afraid enough that we need to hear these reassuring words 350 times

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid...' (Luke 2:8-9)

"Fear" was the topic of the very first Christmas Eve sermon. It was preached by an angel over a field outside Bethlehem to a tiny congregation of shepherds blinking into now radiant skies: "Do not be afraid!" the angel says.

In the Christmas story, as we read it in Luke's Gospel, the words "Do not be afraid" are repeated. Elizabeth and Zechariah will have a son in their old age, John the Baptist is promised. In Luke Chapter 1, the priest Zechariah has a vision in a Temple flame and the angel says "Fear Not"

Mary, a teenage girl from Nazareth is told she will have a son, that she will be the mother to the Son of God, and the message begins with the words: "Do not be afraid."

Shepherds watching their flocks in Bethlehem fields are told "Do not be afraid" before good news and angel song is shared.

And if an angel appeared it might make you afraid. We imagine angels as winged infants, children dressed in white robes and gold tinsel, but maybe the Archangel Gabriel was more imposing than that. The high angels called Seraphim in the Book of Revelation have six wings all

covered with eyes. Who knows how an archangel presents itself? An angelic visitor speaks: “Do not be afraid.”

The author Frederick Buechner suggests that the Angel Gabriel speaks the words “Do not be afraid” in part to himself – seeing how God’s plan of salvation rests in the courage of a teenage girl, how our salvation comes in a tiny, fragile infant, lying in a manger.

Even before the angelic appearance, those in this story may well have been afraid. Joseph and Mary, Mary fully pregnant, are uprooted by an imperial order, forced by an oppressive regime to travel dangerous roads to a far town where there is no room. Mary enters labour in a cold and dark place, far from the support of family. Shepherds labour in the darkness on the edge of town, poor and vulnerable...

In this familiar story there is oppression, fear, rejection, risk, vulnerability – Into this trembling world the angel comes: “Fear not! For I bring you good news of great joy for all people” – Do not be afraid.

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On this Christmas maybe we are somewhat afraid, anxious maybe, fearful just a little...it is a strange time, our second COVID Christmas. Omicron imposes itself on us. A great viral wave threatens.

Two of the things that trigger fear in people are the threat of loss and the presence of uncertainty.

Covid threatens loss. We might lose health, or beloved traditions, or anticipated joys, or cherished connections...

Covid brings uncertainty. Plans are hard to reliably make. We are uncertain about the future...

Into this world the Christmas story speaks, repeating the divine message, the phrase shared 350 times in the Scripture story, the words spoken by fearsome angels, the divine messengers of God, who say first before anything else...” Fear not! Do not be afraid! “

The baby born in Bethlehem grows to be the man who tells his friends: *Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God. Trust also in me.*

Jesus inspired the words of a young woman, from the town of Avila in Spain, Theresa, who in a time of darkness, of loneliness, being torn from her community, wrote in her diary words that are still repeated in prayer and song: “Let nothing trouble you, let nothing frighten you. Those who know God have everything. Only God is enough.”

Hear again the angelic words: “Do not be afraid for I bring you good news of a great joy.”

Christ is born in Bethlehem. God comes as a baby into this fearful world. Jesus is born into our uncertainty, our anxiousness so we can know God shares in it all, is right here with us. May we know the good news, the great joy, proclaimed for all people. Christ is born.

“Do not be afraid for today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God, and saying,

*¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom God’s favor rests.”*

Merry Christmas!