

“Fear Not”

Luke 1:46-55, Isaiah 35:1-10

Collegiate Presbyterian Church

December 12, 2010

Luke 1:46-55

⁴⁶And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; ⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. ⁵⁰His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. ⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. ⁵²He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; ⁵³he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, ⁵⁵according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

Isaiah 35:1-10

³⁵The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus ²it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God. ³Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. ⁴Say to those who are of a fearful heart, “Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you.”

⁵Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; ⁶then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; ⁷the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. ⁸A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God’s people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. ⁹No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Sermon

Harvard chaplain, Peter Gomes, recalls a flight he was on from Boston to London, where he was to preach in an Anglican church the next morning. Midway across the Atlantic, the plane encountered significant turbulence... the captain came on the intercom asking everyone to return to their seats and fasten their belts as the plane lunged and bounced and rocked. Peter Gomes said he was less concerned about the turbulence than the next morning’s

preaching assignment, so he took out his Bible and notes and went to work. The woman in the seat next to him, who had been silent throughout the flight so far, looked at him... she looked at his Bible... and finally asked, "Do you know something I should know?" Well, yes. I do.

It has been said many times that the entire Bible can be distilled into two words: "Fear not!" Because from cover to cover, our Scriptures implore God's people: "Do not be afraid." The night sky shimmered... an angel appeared... and the shepherds were terrified. They were "sore afraid," the King James Version puts it... which led one preacher recently to confess that he used to think that meant the shepherds were so afraid they made themselves sore from shivering. "Fear not. Do not be afraid, for I bring you good tidings of great joy for all people," the angel said.

Jesus was constantly encouraging his followers not to live their fears.¹ When he decides to go to Jerusalem, they are afraid and beg him not to go. When he is arrested, they all flee in fear. After his crucifixion, they cower in a locked room for fear. And when a few of them venture to the place of burial early Sunday morning and find an empty tomb, the words come again: "Fear not. Do not be afraid."

Well, each of these great prophetic texts we have spent time with this Advent is relentless in its conviction that when God comes something big... something radical... something transformative happens – implements of war are melted down and made into tools of agriculture... predators and prey live together in harmony... creation itself is reordered for peace among nations, peace between old enemies, peace in every human heart. And... when God comes there will be no fear. The Biblical assertion is that when God is present there is nothing to fear.

In today's passage, the prophet addresses a nation that is absolutely scared to death. The year is 715 B.C. The place is Jerusalem. To the folks inside the city it looks like the end of everything. The savage Assyrian army has woven a path of devastation across the Middle East and now surrounds Jerusalem's walls, just waiting for the moment of attack. Thousands of fighting men with their swords and spears, their catapults and battering rams, stand with utter contempt for anyone who dared oppose them. Stories about this army have already been told in Jerusalem – of the hammering of battering rams against the city gates... of walls and buildings crumbling before them... of blood-covered bodies in the streets. These stories are now coming to life before their eyes. And it is then that the prophet exhorts them to, "Strengthen weak hands and make firm weak knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear!'"

Returning to something Barb said in her sermon two weeks ago, the Bible has so much to say about fear because fear is such an enemy of life. It's hard to love when you are afraid. It's hard to care passionately and reach out to others... it's hard to be joyful when you are always afraid.

Not all fear is bad, of course... not all fear is our enemy. In fact, fear is a very good friend when it warns us about some danger or threat. It's like a God-given safety mechanism that sets off an amazing string of physiological responses whenever we are in danger: our eyes widen and pupils dilate so we can see more... our heart pounds and our breath quickens, pumping more oxygen to our bodies.

But there is a point at which fear can start to take over and actually begins to diminish our alertness. Adrenaline floods our bodies and produces a kind of hyper-vigilance in which

¹ John Buchanan, "Preaching the Advent Texts: Hope, Peace and Courage," *Journal for Preachers*, Advent 2010, p.11.

our brain locks on to the object of our fear. We can't seem to focus on anything else because the fear has taken over.²

Many people think this is what happened to us as a nation after September 11, 2001... that our well-founded fear at being surprise-attacked ultimately took over and we began to act in ways that were counter to our highest values and ideals. We invaded a nation that no doubt was run by ruthless dictator, but which had nothing to do with the terrorist attacks. We found ways to justify the torture of prisoners and invade the privacy of our own citizens. Facing the end of life as we knew it... sore afraid of losing so many things we hold dear... individually and together we did and still continue to do things that we abhor when our enemies do them.

And when I say "we" I truly mean that - I know my first reaction that Tuesday morning was disbelief - though I watched it happening over and over on television, I still couldn't believe this was happening. My second reaction was an almost overwhelming desire to talk to, or better yet, to be with my loved ones. And my third reaction was an ever-intensifying feeling of fear - "This not only is happening, but this could happen to me and those I love."

Five years after 9/11, journalist Thomas Friedman wrote an article he titled "9/11 Is Over." In that article he said: "I honor and weep for all those murdered that day. But our reaction to 9/11, mine included, has knocked America completely off balance... In the wake of 9/11 we need new precaution. But we also need our old habits and sense of openness. We have been exporting not hope, but fear."

It was some 3,000 years ago when our forbears in faith were absolutely sure they were facing the end of everything they held dear, that Isaiah gave voice to the kind of hope that only a poet can express: "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes."

Well, since I've already distilled the entire Bible into two words, allow me in four words to summarize these three great Advent texts we have heard this year in four: God's coming changes everything. God's coming changes everything. Christ has come into human history, living our life, dying our death, and in his resurrection he has won the final battle... there is no longer anything to fear. This is what we mean when in the Creed we say that Jesus Christ was "dead, buried, and descended into hell." Jesus went into hell for us... facing the worst that can ever happen to us and to our loved ones... and now the battle is over. There is nothing to fear.

Isaiah knew this, and with his poetry painted beautiful pictures of deserts in full bloom, of the blind seeing and the lame leaping like deer. Mary knew this and she testifies that when God comes the proud are scattered and the powerful are brought down... the lowly are lifted up and the hungry are filled with good things. God's coming changes everything... and the question is: "What does this really mean in a world as dangerous as ours? The beautiful poetry of Isaiah... these bold words of Mary... what do they really mean for a world where violent people will go to any lengths to achieve their goals? We dare not be naïve about how dangerous our world is, but neither should we allow our fear to consume us. Because God comes evil and suffering and death have lost their ultimate power... because God comes we can say to one another: "Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God."

² Peter Steinke, "Fear Factor," *Christian Century*, February 20, 2007, p.20.

Good friends once told their pastor, John Buchanan, that one night when there was a fierce thunderstorm, their little three-year old daughter got scared and called out for her parents. And as the thunder pealed and the lightening crashed, her mother came to her, took her in her arms and said, "Don't be afraid. Everything will be alright. God will take care of you."

"I know," the little girl said, "but I want someone with skin."

Those same parents also told him that when they put her to bed, kissed her goodnight and said their bedtime prayers, for years as they left her room she would say: "Make sounds." Make sounds. She wanted the security of her parents' presence... the sound of their voices... the dishes being done... the newspaper rustling... the television set... the sounds of home and safety and love.³

There have been times... and there will continue to be times when each one of us will have "weak hands and feeble knees." Walking into our first AA meeting... standing over the grave of the love of our life... sitting in the oncologist office... the moving van pulling away... graduating into a tight job market. There will be times when we are afraid and even times when fear may so consume us so that we can see nothing else. When these times come I pray that across the years you may hear the words: "Be strong. Do not fear. Here is your God."

You may recall that last year our choir sang from Benjamin Britten's *A Ceremony of Carols*. Well, one of these ancient carols they sang concludes with this image: This little babe, so few days old is come to rifle Satan's fold. All hell doth at his presence quake, though he himself for cold doth shake." It is the mystery of our celebration of Advent... it is the mystery of the "incarnation" itself that the One powerful enough to "rifle Satan's fold" is this One who shivers in the cold... and is the One of whom we sing: Yet in the dark streets shineth the everlasting light: the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."

³ Buchanan, p.12.