
Be Not Fear

**A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
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"The angel said to Mary, 'Be not fear.'" (Luke 1:30)

I thank God for angels. I mean the angels of good, who are all around us. They are all around us in scripture, they are all around us in church, and they are all around us whenever communities of good faith gather together.

The word, "angel" means, simply, "messenger." Angels deliver messages, proclaim things. Angels deliver news. The prefix "ev-" means "good." Thus, an "ev-angel" is someone who proclaims *good* news. At its root, evangelism is the proclamation of good news. *Good* news, not bad news. The Gospel is supposed to be good news.

In the Bible, there is one particular phrase that angels use whenever they show up. It is a sign that the angel is from God. The angel says, simply, "Do not fear." It is the first thing the angel said to Mary.

Angels say that all the time. It is what the angel told Joseph in another story: "Do not be afraid." It is what the angel told Zechariah when Elizabeth was pregnant. It is what the angel told the shepherds in the fields: "Do not fear." It is what Jesus said when he walked on the water. It is what the angel said to the women at the tomb: "Be not afraid." It is what Jesus said to his disciples as they left the tomb. It is what the Son of Man says in the last book of the Bible: "Be not afraid; I am the first and the last."

I am preaching to myself this Christmas. I am preaching to the fear that invades me—and you—every day. What I seem to wake to every day are: more things to be afraid of. When I listen to the radio or TV, when I read the newspaper, when I scroll through web sites, the items that draw my attention are often the items designed to make me afraid of something. More dangers, more cautions, more worries, more horrors, more scoldings.

I turn to the 23rd Psalm: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil."

I thank God, however, not just for the mere *words* of the angels. Sometimes, I hear the words so incessantly that they make me afraid: "Do not fear. Do not fear. Do not fear." Today, there is something about good angels that is even stronger than their words.

It is their *presence*. It is not the admonition, "Do not fear," that comforts us. It is the *presence* of someone without fear. It is the presence of the absence of fear.

Sometimes the best thing we can do for a fearful person is not just tell them, "Don't be afraid." Instead, the best thing we can do is to be a presence of non-fear. To *be* the absence of fear. "*Be... not fear.*" (Not: "*Do ...not fear.*") But: "*Be...not fear.*"

Like the angels, be a presence of peace, not a presence of anxiety.

I am reminded, on this holy day of non-fear, of the great theologian Charles Schultz, the creator of the cartoon, *Peanuts*. One of his strips is only one panel long, one drawing. Charlie Brown and Snoopy are sitting on Snoopy's house looking away towards the sunset. Charlie Brown sighs and says, "One day we will all die, Snoopy." "One day we will all die." And Snoopy's response is simple: "True, but on all the other days, we will

not.”

Ah. There are lots of voices, so many voices, who seize our attention with news of death, prophecies of disaster, warnings of calamity. The general news outlets of the world deal us that kind of news every minute.

The news that we proclaim, from this church, and from every community of good faith around the world, is different. Isaiah said, “Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear” (Isaiah 40:9).

The gospel in these times is not simply to be another word of warning or scolding. Churches themselves have an unfortunate history of being scolders, telling us every minute what we are doing wrong, bringers of bad tidings. “Be afraid,” they seem to say, “Be very afraid.”

That is the old, ungraceful, Christianity of Pharisees. It is bad for us. The healthy gospel is to be, to be, the presence of non-anxiety, to be the presence of non-fear, to be the presence of peace.

The true angels of God, bringing us good news today, proclaiming good news, are the angels singing about peace. True angels are the ones around us whose very presence is peace. They do not even need to say, “Do not fear.” Their presence is itself peace. Their very being is peace. They are not fear.

And the word I do get from them is this:

Do not “be” fear.

Do not “be” anxiety.

Do not “be” high maintenance.

Be “not fear.”

Be “no anxiety.”

Be “low maintenance.”

Be peace. Be calm. Every year we try to sing that. “All is calm, all is bright.” It is what we try to represent in church every Christmas Eve, when we stop the liturgy, right after communion and before the last prayer. We get still. We turn down the lights. We light candles. We stop. And we sing the hymn, “Silent Night.” “All is calm. All is bright.” We are singing about a new presence in the world!

The angel told Mary, “Be not fear.” And I am saying the same thing, to myself, and to you, and to the world, “Be not fear.”

Thank you for being a part of “comfort and joy” this year. Thank you for wanting a holy place where “all is calm, all is bright.” The world needs this presence of “No Fear.” Thanks be to God for good news: “Be not fear.”

AMEN.

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