

Rev. DC Fortune, Christmas Eve Homily
December 24, 2022
“Be Not Afraid”

Be not afraid.

In the holy scriptures, the instruction “be not afraid,” or some similar translation to that effect, is found multiple times. It is sometimes said by God, and sometimes by Gabriel, God’s primary mouthpiece to mortals.

In all of the Bible, “don’t be afraid” happens just over 150 times, depending on which translation one uses. In all those words, millions of verses, thousands of chapters, and dozens of books, “be not afraid,” appears just 150 times.

Which makes it particularly remarkable to find it four times in just the Gospel According to Luke. Three times, an angel of the Lord says the words, and once they are said by Jesus.

Early on, Gabriel appears to Zechariah to congratulate him on his wife Elizabeth’s pregnancy. Good news or not, when an angel appears out of the ether, it can be disconcerting, so the first thing Gabriel has to say is “don’t be afraid. I’m not here to hurt you.” Then, because Zechariah questions Gabriel about the prophecy, he is struck dumb until his son is born, whom they named John. John will become known later as John the Baptist.

Later, Gabriel appears to Mary and says “Congratulations! You’re God’s favored one!” she, likewise, is taken aback. “Be not afraid,” says Gabriel. “You’re going to have a baby, and you’ll name him Jesus and he’s going to do all kinds of miraculous things.”

Once Jesus was born in Bethlehem, Gabriel appears to shepherds minding their flocks, to tell them the good news that a savior for Israel has arrived.

Again, angels appearing out of the night sky to illiterate sheep herders in the desert plains is alarming, so they fell about in a panic. “Be not afraid,” says Gabriel. “I bring you tidings of great joy!”

Once they had calmed down, the shepherds got the message and went to see the baby Jesus in Bethlehem. When they arrived, they told Mary what Gabriel had said, and it pleased her.

The one other time “don’t be afraid” is said is when Jesus calls his first disciples, the fishermen Simon, and James and John, who were brothers. He performed a miracle by filling their nets with fish, and Simon fell down before him, saying “get away! I am not worthy!” but Jesus said “Be not afraid, I have come to make you fishers of people.” And the three men tossed down their nets and followed him.

Be not afraid, says Gabriel, almost every time he shows up somewhere.

Take courage, friends, says Jesus, every time he asks his people to stretch beyond what is comfortable.

In the reign of Herod, Judea was a rough and scary place. It was an occupied land, and the Hebrew people were treated badly by the Roman occupiers. Nothing was safe. Everything was risky and dangerous and frightening.

The Hebrew people were deeply discouraged. Years before, the kingdom of David had split into North and South, and the tribes of Israel had scattered across the land. The temple had been destroyed and been reconstructed, but life was terribly insecure for the only monotheistic believers of the age.

“Be not afraid” is a tall order in times like those, directed at people who felt very much powerless.

“Be not afraid,” implies that support is available and on offer. I cannot imagine what kind of skepticism might have resulted when people seeking a messiah to restore the Kingdom of David to its former glory were met with an infant lain in a pile of straw, but that’s what Gabriel said, so there must be something to it.

It turns out, of course, that the wee infant in the hay set in motion a revolution of love and religion that has lasted over two thousand years.

Granted, that revolution has morphed and changed over the years, but the underlying message has remained: don’t be afraid. Love each other. Be kind to one another. Be humble. You’ll be ok.

Be not afraid. A child is born that will change everything. It seems like a lot to take on faith, but big changes have been made by smaller events than the birth of a single man.

When the world is on fire, like it was for those ancient Hebrews, God sent the answer in the form of an infant. There is so much faith in that story.

It takes faith to believe the word of an unmarried woman about her sexual history

It takes faith to believe the word of an angel who keeps showing up in weird places.

It takes faith to believe that an infant could be the answer.

If we can believe some of these, even the tiniest bit, then we can believe that we are capable of making big changes in our world.

So much is possible for us, so much greatness is contained within us, if only we dare to show it and share it.

Be not afraid, friends. Open your hearts and let the world feel your love.

Be not afraid. Open your minds and learn about the wondrous things the world holds.

Be not afraid to be vulnerable, soft, gentle, kind.

Be not afraid to look at the world through the eyes of a child, to see the wonder that surrounds us, to marvel at creation, at snowflakes and droplets of dew and hoar frost on windowpanes.

Be not afraid. I bring good news. And the good news is that you – we – are not alone.

We are in this life together, designed to love each other and to bring comfort where it is needed.

Be not afraid. I bring you great news. You are not alone. You are loved. Don’t ever forget it.

Amen.