

You overhear things at Christmas time. It's funny what kids will say. There was a six-year-old boy who was excited to go to church on Christmas Eve. He told his cousin who said, "Well I'd be afraid if I were you." The little boy asked why, and his cousin said, "If you're not asleep, Santa might not stop at your house." We live in a society that teaches fear, even about Santa Claus! This Christmas Eve God's voice bellows, sings and whispers, "Fear Not!"

Fear Not! Be Not Afraid! Do not fear. These words are in the bible no less than 365 times. When a phrase is repeated it means pay attention. Throughout the Christmas Story God's "fear not" message is clear. When Mary receives her news, the angel begins by saying, "Do not be afraid!" When Joseph learns that his fiancé is expecting, an angel visits him and repeats, "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife." During the midnight birth announcement to the terrified shepherds, the angels says, "Fear not! For behold! I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be for all people." Not some people. All people. "In a culture that perpetuates fear, in a world where some act and speak in ways designed to terrify us, God says, "Fear Not." What reason does God give to convince us to lay aside our fear? "I am with you," God says. I am coming, a newborn baby, named Jesus." God's voice is decisive and clear. Having a baby? Be not afraid! Traveling to Bethlehem without reservations at the inn? No worries! A quiet evening interrupted by bright light and singing angels? Fear Not." (paraphrase from Rev. Aspey 12/18/16)

This sounds nice. At least for the hour we are here, cozy with candles, music, friends, family...

Once we venture outside the red doors, reality awaits. It's been a hard year for fear not, a hard fall for be not afraid, even a hard week for turn the other cheek. So while be not afraid sounds nice, people seeking faith in God need to ask, can it be real? Is it possible to fear not? And if it is possible, how?

The scriptures are full of themes that have the power and possibility to shape us to become people who commit to live unafraid of fear. In January I'm going to preach about this but for tonight, here are a few themes that are blocks in a foundation of a life without fear.

Stay Awake. In the Jewish religion there is a story of a traveler who is walking down a road when he sees a beautiful house on fire. He says, "How can it be that something so beautiful would burn and nobody seems to care?" Every day it seems we instantly hear or see another tragedy. In this world, beautiful houses are burning. Living without fear means requires us to we pay attention. It is up to us to stay awake, too help put out the flames. (Rabbi Sharon Brous, Ted Talk, 10/20/2016, It's time to reclaim and reinvent religion.)****

How do we stay awake, see suffering, engage conflict?

Community. God didn't create people to be isolated. God creates people to be in community. Look at the Christmas story! Mary and Joseph depend on others. The innkeeper gives shelter. The animals provide warmth. I imagine the shepherds bring food and the three gifts from the wise men helped finance the Holy Family's journey to Egypt and back. From the moment of God's birth, the Holy family was not alone. In community, our eyes are opened and we learn to act.

How is authentic community possible where there are such deep divisions?

Forgive. To live without fear, we have to learn to forgive. Jesus says 70 x 7 which means forgive until our ice hearts melt. Forgive even when you aren't feeling it. Forgive until we can look in the mirror and love ourselves, even knowing that each of us is a mess. A beautiful beloved mess. We have to practice forgiveness until we can look our enemy in the eye and see that the one we loathe is also a beloved child of God. Every authentic community teaches, learns, practices forgiveness.

Hope. Forgiveness comes from a solid foundation of Hope. "God's hope is not naive. God's hope rejects pessimism and defies cynicism.

Hope knows that the worst thing is not the last thing.

Hope sees that the grave is empty.

Hope gives us strength and courage to face the future unafraid, a moment at a time, beginning now.

The shepherds were on the hillside, out in the country, away from the city, doing their work, settling down the sheep to sleep when the angels burst into their quiet night and said, "Fear Not!" For to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord. Fear Not. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen his glory.

Prayer:

Draw us into your love, Christ Jesus, and deliver us from fear.

On Christmas Day and the 12 days of Christmas, R

When the news is terrifying, R

When joy fills us, R

When despair knocks on our door, R

When we are disappointed, when we suffer, R

When we feel loved, R

Every moment of each day, may we pray, R

*** With thanksgiving for Rev. Amy Aspey and her inspiration for this message. From her sermon/letter to a newborn baby 12/18/2016.

*****Thank you to Holly Hahn for sharing this Ted Talk with me.