

“BE NOT AFRAID”

a sermon on Jer. 1:5-10, Psalm 71:1-6, Hebrews 12:18-29, and Luke 13:10-17
August 21, 2016 by Dr. Gregory A. Goodwiller
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A few years ago, I preached here through the season of Advent. You might recall that in those weeks, we looked at how each of the four Gospel writers *began* their accounts . . . and how in those opening words they were each revealing their “perspectives” on the meaning of our Lord’s life, death, and resurrection.

The lectionary Gospel readings through this fall are working their way through Luke’s Gospel, and while his themes won’t necessarily be our focus each week, I thought a good way to get started together would be to review Luke’s perspective in general – including how his book begins.

First of all, Luke is writing to some unknown Greek nobleman named Theophilus, and he opens his account by explaining that he is composing an “orderly account” for him “of the things of which [he has] been informed.” Luke is the Gospel “story-teller.” The one who organizes the accounts and events into a coherent *narrative*.

Luke is *also* the writer (in particular distinction from Mark), who isn’t in a *hurry* to get through the story’s “opening acts,” if you will. Whereas the other writers either don’t mention Jesus’ birth and the circumstances leading up to and surrounding it at all, as with Mark and John, or only briefly, as with Matthew, *Luke* is the Gospel writer who slows down, and *savors* that context. The characters in the great cosmic drama being played out on that stage don’t just *speak*, they *sing*. Luke isn’t just telling the Gospel *story*. He is developing the Gospel *liturgy*. The Scripture songs the Church has come to know as the *Magnificat*, the *Benedictus*, and the *Nunc Dimittis* – used by faithful Christians around the world to this day in musical settings during daily prayer come from Luke’s opening chapters.

And then, in particular distinction from *Matthew’s* account, there is Luke’s emphasis not just (maybe not even *primarily*) on the leaders of the land. It is on all the *other* participants in the drama.

Those of you who participate in the Old Testament Overview course that I’ll be leading during the Sunday School hour starting in a couple of weeks will hear me emphasize over, and over, and probably *over* again, the importance in our particular faith tradition, of the Old Testament prophets, priests, and kings, because

that is the faith *system* that Jesus came to fulfill. And so it isn't surprising that Matthew's account (including his account of Jesus' birth) focuses first on King Herod and his fear of the prophecies about the birth of a messiah, and then the "wise men from the East" who came to pay homage.

But those people are not "important" because they are somehow better, or higher, or more "important" people *to God*. That's what always get terribly wrong. It's what the "powers that be" had wrong in Jesus' day, and they certainly aren't alone in human history.

The *offices* are important . . . but only to make it clear that those offices are destined to *all* be fulfilled by Jesus Christ. Those who hold the offices are not *unimportant* to God. They just aren't any *more* important than anyone else.

And so Luke's emphasis is on *who* Mary and Joseph are – peasants, really, who can't find a room to rent in Bethlehem, or afford a lamb as an offering at their purification ceremony after he is born. Mary's song, the *Magificat*, proclaims, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden. . . He has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away."

And unlike in Matthew where those who come to give homage to the birth are foreign dignitaries, in Luke they are common shepherds from their fields.

So, the "Christ event," for Luke, but *also* the "Christian life" for his followers, is a matter of "living into" the holy drama, in which God's purposes are working out in the world, transforming it back into the world that was the intent of the first created order, in which all people dwell together in peace and unity.

With that in mind, I think it's also important to consider what Luke considers to be the greatest *hindrance* to our participation in the drama. And without a doubt, that hindrance is *fear*. In all of its forms, the word "fear" occurs nearly a thousand times in Scripture, so Luke is certainly not alone. But he uses the word more than twice as often as any other Gospel writer.

Fear, in the first place, is very *natural*, which is why the *very first* words of the angels in Luke's account to Zechariah the priest, and to Mary, and to the Shepherds, were "be not afraid." Fear can be debilitating. At the same time, in the Biblical narrative fear also has a very positive side. "Fear of the Lord is the beginning wisdom," the Psalmist wrote. "Fear of God," in the Scriptures, is *not* a bad or debilitating thing at all. And by the way, this isn't a matter different ancient

words that we translate with the same word in English. It is exactly the same word. In Greek, the word is “phobéw” – the same root as our English word, “phobia,” the fear of something.

Our Old Testament and Epistle readings for the morning both address fear, and how Scripture teaches us to “conquer” it. First the prophet Jeremiah. When God called him to be His spokesperson, he expressed his fear of facing the people and not knowing what to say – and being left abandoned and alone. God reminded him that he had *never* been alone – that God had been with him all his days, from even before he was formed in the womb. Looking *back*, then, Jeremiah found his strength to go forward into servanthood.

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews looks in the other direction – forward, to where this is all headed. He writes “but you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to a judge who is God of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks more graciously than the blood of Abel.” And with that vision as motivation, he concludes, “therefore, let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe.”

His recommendation to Christians facing the fears and perils of life, is to focus on that vision, and channel their fears into the (appropriate) reverence of awe of authentic worship of the “God of all,” and the savior of the whole world.

And so now, back to Luke. Today’s reading – the story of a healing Jesus performed on the Sabbath – is really a direct fulfillment of Mary’s prophecy in the *Magificat*, in which he quite literally lifts up a lowly one, demonstrates the dignity she deserves as a precious child of God, to the chagrin of the synagogue leaders, who in the end, it says, were “put to shame.”

And I think the story demonstrates the debilitating results of fear on the part of *all* the major players in the story. We shouldn’t go too far down the road of psychoanalyzing the woman who we are told “had a spirit of infirmity for eighteen years . . . was bent over and could not fully straighten herself.” But there *had* to be some deep-set, debilitating fear in there somewhere.

I am primarily interested in the “ruler of the synagogue” in this story, and Jesus’ other “adversaries,” particularly since, let’s face it, those of us in this room probably have more in common with them than with the woman. Why didn’t *they* do something for her? Fear of failing, and the embarrassment it would have

caused? Fear of incurring God’s wrath for breaking a Sabbath law – and probably the social stigma that would have gone along with it? Fear of putting at risk their “place” in the social order of the day?

When I began planning this sermon, I had in mind for it to be a follow-up to the work many of you did over the summer with Michael Frost’s book, *Surprise the World*. In the end, I pretty much went in another direction. And yet, I think this same argument about fear applies to much of what he advocates.

For those of you who were *not* participants in that study, the book outlines a set of “habits” that have to do with what I would call both “inreach” (study and meditation) and “outreach” – living what he calls “questionable lives” by being willing to invite strangers to break bread at your table, intentionally engaging in acts of kindness that are a “blessing” to others (and not just family and church members). Doing things that might lead people to question *why* you’re doing them, and then perhaps to conversations about your faith in this Savior who proclaims that God cares equally about *everyone*.

That’s the point, isn’t it? That’s what Jesus proclaims. And yet two thousand years later, we still see only glimpses of the coming kingdom. And learning to participate in it is *hard*. It means putting some things at *risk*. And we’re *fearful* about that. How will it *look*, if I do that? If I give *this* street person some money, soon I’ll be *swamped* with people asking for my help, and I can’t possibly help them all. I won’t know what to *say*. And on, and on.

Frost’s answer, as best I can tell, is that we all simply need to step up to our fears and help *someone*. Do *something* good. Regularly. Make it a *habit*. In so doing, we usher in the kingdom Jesus came to establish – one small act, one little step at a time, and that’s all God asks any of us, to keep moving forward.

It’s a fearful and sometimes hateful world out there. It *needs* people who are willing to do what is good and right, for the sake of the kingdom. The Church needs us to channel our fears into reverence and praise, and trust that God will be with us, give us words to say, and show us acts to perform that demonstrate the Good News, because Christ lived, and died, and was raised to be the Savior of the *whole* world. And every living soul is a precious child of God.

To God be the Glory, now and forever.