



## Do Not Be Afraid

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin  
Wednesday, December 24, 2008*

“In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.” They were terrified. As well they might be! Very strange happenings these were—in the fields, with their flocks, at night: as all of a sudden an angel of the Lord stood before them! These were shepherds, simple people, sensible people, accustomed to the ways of the wilderness at night. They were right to be terrified. It would be odd if they were not terrified. I would be terrified; wouldn't you? ‘Who are you?’ they wondered. ‘What are you, that comes to us out of the shadows of the night? And they were terrified.

“But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid.”

Much as we try to avoid it, fear is not always a bad thing. Fear warns us of danger, prompts us to be cautious, to be on the look-out for that which would do us harm. Fear protects us. So we ought not always hide even from our own fear.

The spiritual teacher, Gerald May\*, upon learning that the cancer within him had spread and that he had very little time to live, decided to spend some of that time in the wilderness. Despite the winter cold, he set out with his tent and sleeping bag to be alone in the state forest. One night a sound woke him—“every sense sharper than I had ever thought possible.” “I hear the crunch of footfalls breaking through the snow crust.” A large creature, a bear—or worse, a human. “I have never been so terrified, not in Vietnam, not anywhere. I am lying completely vulnerable, unable to extricate myself from this prison of double-zipped sleeping bags. My fingers twitch feebly at my sides. There is nowhere to go, nothing to do, nothing to see, nothing even to smell, only hear the sounds and wait and be afraid, be fear.”

The shepherds knew such fear on the lonely hillside. Yet Gerry May, lying in fear, was suddenly overcome by excitement with the sheer poignancy of being alive. And filled no longer with dread, but with gratitude, he sang out with glee; recognizing fear no longer as an enemy from whom to hide, but a friend to embrace. He found himself—so close to death—filled with the spirit of life “standing on its toes right here, right now with clear attention, sharp senses, ready body, flared nostrils, bristled hair, poised muscles, pumping heart, clean breath.” Fully awake and alive in fear.

“The angel said to them, “Do not be afraid.” Do not. And the angel told them of a child, an infant, just born, wrapped in cloth, in a manger. Do not be afraid; I am bringing you good news of great joy for to you is born this day a Savior, the Messiah, the Lord; Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace.

Those terrified shepherds, those wise and sensible shepherds, then did something very important; despite their fear, they listened to what the angel had to say. There is a story I heard recently of a great number of dignitaries gathered before the Queen when somebody's cell phone rings. Naturally, everyone looks . . . elsewhere; feigning complete innocence, hoping it is not their phone, pretending not to notice. But the cell phone is insistent. Finally the Queen turns, looks directly at the phone's owner, and says, “You'd better answer it; it might be somebody important.”

Those shepherds listened to the strange events that the angel announced and—prompted perhaps by a sense of curiosity, or even wonder, and filled with sufficient courage—they took their flocks and went as the angel directed them.

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\*Gerald G. May, *The Wisdom of Wilderness: Experiencing the Healing Power of Nature*, Harper, San Francisco, 2006, pp. 42 & 46.

Do not be afraid. God does not wish for us to live lives filled with fear. Fear may be good at times, yes, but not lives filled with fear. God desires we live lives without fear or live lives in spite of fear. We know of strange and unusual occurrences in our day, of things which lead us to fear. Previous generations have lived in the shadow of enemies; I suppose we live in the shadow of terrorists—who are by definition terrifying. Yet in these days, it is not so much an enemy that we face, as it is uncertainty. Most fear arises when we sense there is not enough—not enough security, not enough money, not enough to eat, or not enough protection; not enough love.

We ought not be surprised that an economy dependent upon a voracious appetite for consumption and greed should eventually crumble. Yet we are surprised and had come to depend upon it, and upon our capacity to generate more, always more. So in these uncertain times, we are fearful with the loss of jobs, with the loss of institutions that have been around long enough to have seemed reliable and sure. We are fearful of the debts our children will face, that we will outlive our savings. We are fearful of what will happen to the poorest and weakest of the world.

The greatest fear, always hidden, ever present, is our fear of death. Thus, do we labor and strive, eat and exercise, learn and build, and busy ourselves with accomplishments and victories.

When my grandmother died and her furniture was being divided up, we found that the painting which always hung over her mantle had scrawled on the back in her familiar hand: “If I die, this should go to Teddy.” It was the “I . . . I die” that prompted first our laughter, then appreciation for her honest self-deception. It is safe to say we’ll all die, even while we live as if this were just a remote possibility. Thus, it is my privilege to remind you that in God’s love all shall be well, that God’s love shall abide, even in death.

For many, the fear with which we struggle is not the fear of dying; it is the fear of living: when we are so afraid of taking a mis-step that we take no step, so afraid of trying and failing—or even of trying and succeeding—that we decide it is safest to not try at all. There are many practitioners of the fear of living—stuck, immobile, imprisoned.

“The angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.” God does not wish for us to live lives of fear. Thus, God comes to us, not in power, might, or glory. God comes to us in love. A bit of curiosity and sufficient courage may have prompted the shepherds to disregard their fear, but the antidote to fear is neither curiosity nor courage; it is love. God comes to us in love.

As it is written in the First Epistle of John (4:18 & 4:9), “There is no fear in love, for perfect love casts out fear.” “God’s love [is] revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him.” Good news of great joy for all the people.

In fear, we withdraw, close in upon ourselves, protect ourselves. In our attempt to shut the enemy out, we shut ourselves in. Sarah and I lived for two years in a very dangerous city neighborhood; for a variety of reasons, it was an extremely difficult chapter in our lives. Despite the fact the house already had bars on the windows, so shaped by fear were we, that we added even more bars until we were completely imprisoned in a cell of our own making. Scarcity and uncertainty can do this to us.

But God found us in our cell, and came to us as love—as love from our children and families, our friends and peers, who called us forth to ourselves and showed us the path out.

In love, we turn not in but out, not from others but toward others. We worry less about protecting and guarding, and instead find ways to offer and share. Instead of feeling empty, with an aching sense of scarcity, we may be filled with an ample sense of abundance.

“Be not afraid,” Jesus said to his disciples, then promised, “I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Christmas is not the celebration of a one-time event; rather, it is the occasion to remember and rejoice that Jesus is Emmanuel, meaning “God-with-us.” This does not make the uncertainties of our lives go away, yet, as we accept in faith the truth of God-with-us, those uncertainties lose their power over us.

God comes to us in love: first of all in tenderness, with healing power and mercy. “What do you want me to do for you?” is the question Jesus puts directly to the paralytic, to the blind man Bartimaeus, to me and to you. “What do you want me to do for you?”

God comes to us in love: calling us, even commanding us, to love; to love God and to love one another, to love our neighbor; to love not only the lovely and the lovable, but also the un-lovely and the un-lovable, those whom the world would just as soon forget.

Someone asks, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus replies with a story of a man beaten by robbers, left bloody and scary-looking by the edge of the road. One by one, the people come, see, avert their eyes, avoid the beaten man, pass by him on the other side. Until one, a foreigner, a Samaritan—whom we know as “good”—stops, sees, binds up the stranger’s wounds, brings him to a safe place, and pays for his recovery. Says Jesus: “Go and do likewise.”

“They were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid.” “When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now . . . and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.” God comes to us in love. Let us go and see. Let us rejoice with great gladness of heart. Amen.