

Recognizing Angels—Matthew 1: 18-25
(December 24, 2017—4th Sunday in Advent)

What are you afraid of? For me its snakes, long, high bridges over water, roller coasters or any other stomach turning ride. Lets take it a step further, what are some of your deeper fears? The fears that invade your mind at three o'clock in the morning. At this point in my life mine tend to be financial; providing for my children's education is a big one. What are yours? Do you fear not having enough on which to retire? Do you fear what age might do to your body and mind? Do you fear that the planet is being irrevocably harmed? Do you fear the lightening fast pace of change in society?

American writer and television produce Lena Dunham says this about fear, "I have only the vaguest memory of a life before fear. Every morning when I wake up there is one blissful second before I look around the room and remember my daily terrors."¹ Fear is part of the human condition, since scripture is a very human document, fear plays a large role in the Christmas story. It hit me this week that fear is one of the most common themes in Luke and Matthew's stories of Jesus' birth. Four times between the two gospels angels make appearances to people telling them not to be afraid. We read one today, do you know what the others are? Angels make appearances to Joseph, Mary, Zechariah the father of John the baptist and to the shepherds.

Joseph had plenty to fear. His betrothed was pregnant before marriage by another. If he stayed with her his reputation and that of his family could be ruined. In those times reputations meant everything, no one would do business with you. If he doesn't call off the wedding in just the right way, with the proper tact, Mary could be killed. Yet here is this angel, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid...". It seems that fear, is a major obstacle to Jesus' birth. Fear gets in the way of Love taking on flesh, fear is an obstacle to incarnation.

We tend to think of doubt as being the great enemy of faith. But, its fear not doubt that is the great enemy of faith.² Doubt can co-exist with faith. In fact, if we can face the questions and allow ourselves to sit with the discomfort that questioning brings, doubt actually deepens our faith. But not fear, any ideas why? Fear activiates all of our control responses, we close in on ourselves, becoming wary of others, being careful about who we let in. We try to control as many circumstances as we can, both events and people. Sometimes we tightly plan our lives, making everything predictable so that there is no room for anything new.

Fear drives us to control and when we do that we put ourselves in charge, we are in the God role. We start controlling life instead of listening to what life is asking of us. Fear is

¹ <https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/21933444-not-that-kind-of-girl>

² I do recognize that fear has its place in the face of real threats. Its always a matter of discernment, of asking 'is this a fear that needs to be acted on because I'm actually in some kind of danger or does it just need to be acknowledged because I am being challenged to grow and to risk?'

the enemy of faith because faith is all about surrender, about giving up control, about paying attention to the movement of the Spirit in our lives. Another way to put it is that faith is about putting our lives in service to Love. Faith is about saying 'not my will, but thy will be done.'

But our culture loves fear, fear sells. Fear sells products and services, drives up ratings and garners votes. There is no more contemporary example than the election of the current American president. An election that promoted fear of immigrants as a problem and conveniently enough one candidate as the solution. It is a testament to the power of fear that the facts didn't seem to matter. In an article entitled "The Mythical Connection Between Immigrants and Crime"³, the Wall Street Journal reviewed a number of studies which concluded that immigrants are actually less likely than the established population to commit crime. Fear sells, it sells us the comfort of control, even when it is an illusion. We're really up against it folks. If you're feeling like it's really hard to live a faithful life, I can't blame you. Our society works against faith. It promotes fear and sells control as the antidote.

That is why it is so important to listen to angels, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife." The angel is saying, 'Beyond the fear great things are waiting Joseph, God wants to use you. If you will step beyond the fear you will play your part in making God's presence a reality in your world. Don't be afraid Joseph, I've come to tell you that God is with you, don't listen to those voices of fear and control. God is breaking in, breaking all the rules about what's socially acceptable and what's not to fulfill the promises made to your people. Don't be afraid Joseph, take Mary as your wife, have faith and see.'

What are angels in scripture? Not what they look like, we're all aware of what we think angels look like, no I'm asking about the role they fulfill in the stories of our faith? What's their job? Angels are messengers from God. Angels point to and reveal the sacred and the holy in our lives. Angels tell us not to be afraid, because they see what we cannot, will not or are unable to see. Angels see the divine image in each of us, no matter how covered up it is with hurts, betrayals, violations, resentments, ego or whatever else. Angels see the potential within us for birthing God in our world. Perhaps you've had an experience with an angel, because angels don't just come in bright robes with wings on their backs, most often these messengers from God are rather disguised in the plainest forms possible.

A friend of mine grew up in a very difficult family situation. It was a family rife with mental illness, rigid religiosity and abuse, of the physical, emotional, sexual and spiritual kind. It was a chaotic, unsettling and soul crushing household. She has few memories that evoke anything other than anxiety and sorrow. One rare, hopeful memory does stand out however. It was one of the few things that spoke to her of the possibility of a

³Jason L. Riley, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/the-mythical-connection-between-immigrants-and-crime-1436916798>

different world. She remembers a neighbour, someone older than her parents. My friend has no idea how much this neighbour knew about what went on her home, but she knew enough that every so often this neighbour would call my friend onto her porch, offer her a cookie, pat her on the knee, hold her hand, and just sit with her. To my friend, this neighbour was a lifeline. In this simple act of hospitality and presence my friend heard the message that she was worthy enough that someone wanted to give her a cookie and spend some time with her. To my friend this neighbour was like an angel piercing the fear. This neighbour brought a message from God; “Don’t be afraid, I’m here with you, I see sacred beauty in you, I see the image of the Creator that is buried under all the pain and confusion.”

Angels are those who encourage us to be our true selves, to incarnate God according to our gifts and passions. Angels are those who name injustice, they get angry when the image of the divine in people gets distorted because of oppression. They see possibilities for people to express the sacred within them. Angels today echo the message of the angel in our faith story, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid”.⁴ Maybe you’re sitting among angels right now. Maybe you’re angel to someone.

“Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife.” Don’t be afraid you faithful, you seekers, in spite of all that you hear and see. Keep your eyes, ears and hearts open for angels. They have something to tell us; love waits to be born in your midst. It’s a different story than the one you are used to. Don’t be afraid, be faithful, God needs your help, you have a part to play in the birthing of love in the world. Don’t be afraid, the time is almost here, you’ll see. Our Advent journey continues, we’re almost there. Amen.

⁴ Here is a longer version of this section that I edited out for time reasons:

Because angels see the sacred in us, because they see the potential we cannot see, they encourage us to be our true selves, to simply let what is holy in us to flow and to be and to take shape in real and tangible ways. Angels gently encourage us and challenge us to not settle for less than what we can be, angels encourage us to stop listening to distractions and to voices that serve others’ purposes and needs, angels listen and help us to listen to the messages and themes that repeat themselves in our lives, to that voice within us that will not let us go. Angels see our beauty, our gifts and our passions and they remind us of that. Angels, by their presence and constancy help us to risk being our true selves, they help us to express or give birth to the God within us. They echo the message of the angel in our faith story, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid”. Because angels see the sacred in all peoples, because they see the potential for all peoples to birth God they name injustice. Angels get angry when greed, narrow self-interest and the lust for power and control attempts to distort or smother the sacred in people. Angels see the possibilities in their people freed from the yoke of oppression. Angels encourage the oppressed by their actions and their words to see their own beauty, to see the sacred that seeks expression through them. They echo the message of the angel in our faith story, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid”.