

Do Not Be Afraid

Matthew 1:18-25

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There have been many times when I wished the angel Gabrielle had tracked me down, met me in my place of terror, and whispered convincingly, 'Do not be afraid.' When I arrived on the campus of Andover Newton Theological School in the fall of 1971, things started happening quickly. There was the registering for classes, many of which sounded like Greek to me; there was the purchasing of books. There was the challenge to start thinking theologically, whatever that meant. But most terrifying of all was my field work assignment, to be the youth minister at a Methodist Church over in Waltham. The thought of ministering to junior and senior high school students left me feeling like an alien from outer space picking up a tenor saxophone and having no clue what to do with it or how to hold it or where to begin! As I parked my car on Moody Street and approached the side door of the church for my interview, I saw, for the first time, the official name of the church in large, unmistakable letters emblazoned across the exterior: Immanuel United Methodist Church. 'Immanuel', I thought to myself as if a bell were ringing from some previous life. 'Immanuel' had meant something once upon a time, maybe in Sunday School. And then, like a Western Union telegram, my memory bank delivered what I needed to receive. 'Immanuel' means 'God is with us.' Thus armed, I entered the church unafraid, at least, less afraid!

In the Christmas story, it is Joseph who is afraid. And it's not the holy kind of fear that leads to wisdom and humility. It's the other kind of fear that paralyzes a person, that robs us of our ability to do the most loving thing.

That's the real problem with fear; it robs us of our energy for doing what love demands. Think back to those times in your life when you were truly afraid, even terrorized. I suppose there are isolated cases where the fear became the motivator; but I suspect your fear had a crippling effect, held you back from doing what love would have hoped for.

That's the way it usually is with me.

Joseph is sore afraid. Something is happening that's never happened before! Changes are taking place in ways that are out of his control. He thinks of the future and all he can do is worry about what people are going to say, what the in-laws will think, how his peer group will judge. He considers his options and seems to be blocked from knowing and doing the most loving thing. That's how we know he was afraid. The angel appears and seems to call out to Joseph, 'Look up here! Look up here!' In my imagination, I see Joseph in his dream turning and looking up toward the angel, Gabrielle, and he sees the angel holding a sign with one word emblazoned upon it, IMMANUEL. It's like that sign I saw on Moody Street. Joseph awakens from his dream and he is no longer afraid of Mary's pregnancy or of anything else! He is no longer afraid because he has this inner-knowing, this certainty that God is surely with them. Of this truth he had been utterly unconscious. But the dream brings it all into clarity.

The child is born, and we aren't given too many details thereafter. The details are left to our imagination. So, in my private fantasizing, it is easy for me to picture Mary and Joseph placing this one word, Immanuel, on their refrigerator door as a magnet, on the rear bumper of their Chevy S10 pickup truck, even on their luggage. For the birth is only the beginning of their trials and tribulations, only the first of their fears. They will need daily assurances that God is truly with them, that Immanuel is more than a name, a hope; more than a name, a joy; more than a name, a light in the darkness!

When I think about the possibility of tearing down the social hall and the A and B wings and building a whole new facility, I have to tell you there is a little fear involved. When I recall what the doctor said to all of us in the family on that first visit to the oncologist: there is no cure for ovarian cancer; I have to tell you there is a little fear involved. When I think of the sixty high school students who come to Wednesday School faithfully every week and what emotional trauma they have to cope with everyday; I have to tell you there is a little fear involved.

This is why the Christmas story still matters. Fear persists. It is never going away. Joseph was afraid. I get to being afraid. So do you! But we have this angel, Gabrielle, who keeps getting our attention, keeps drawing our focus to the one word that makes all the difference, 'Immanuel'. God is with us. This is the blessed announcement of Christmas. It's an argument for celebrating Christmas every day of the year!

About once a year, I have occasion to drive down Moody Street in Waltham, Massachusetts. I slow down by the fire station because the next building is where it all started. It needs a coat of paint. A few shingles on the roof need replacing. A broken window still has a temporary cardboard replacement. But the sign is still emblazoned across the front, still a bold reminder that we are not alone, that even in the presence of great terror God is with us. In the greatest of hope, Amen!