

# *do not be afraid*

a sermon preached on the

## *the Annunciation to the Blessed Virgin Mary*

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at

### *st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Isaiah 7:10-14; Psalm 40:6-13; Hebrews 10:4-10; Luke 1; 26-38

I wonder, are you afraid at the moment?

Life seems far less certain than we usually imagine it is. Around the world, people are dying in their thousands. We cannot meet together to worship, we cannot touch our friends and none of us knows if, or when, we too will catch the virus.

Yes, there is much cause to be afraid.

Mary too had many reasons to be afraid. A young, unmarried woman, living in occupied territory, encountering an angel and being asked by God to bear God's son and then to deal with the consequences of living in the world, unexpectedly pregnant. She could reasonably have expected to be killed.

Yes, Mary had many reasons to be afraid.

One of the things I think is most wonderful about this passage is that in the midst of circumstances to which the normal, human response would be fear, God's word is, *do not be afraid*.

This is the most repeated command in the whole Bible. I haven't counted myself, but I have read that there are 365 different verses that say do not be afraid, one for every day of the year. Here are some of them.

Deuteronomy 31:8 It is the Lord who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed.

Joshua 1:9 I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.

Isaiah 41:10 Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.

Isaiah 43:1b Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.

Philippians 4:6-7 Do not worry about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Mark 6:50 Immediately he spoke to them and said, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.'

The prevalence of verses like this tells us two things.

Firstly, it tells us that people are afraid. It is natural to fear many things that are happening around us and it is fairly common to fear things that haven't happened and probably never will. People have always been afraid, and they always will.

The second thing the huge number of Bible verses about fear tells us, is that God knows we are afraid and wants to release us from our fear. To give you another verse, that we say at the conclusion of Monday Morning Prayer each week, 2 Timothy 1:7, God did not give us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of self-discipline.

God understands human fear, and God wants us to live without being controlled by that fear.

However, to live without being controlled by fear is not the same as not ever feeling fear. As someone who wasn't Kipling once wrote, *if you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs, ..... you probably haven't really grasped the situation.*

Fear in certain situations is an appropriate response. It can keep us and those we love safe. Those who, in the midst of the covid19 pandemic, refuse to take it seriously and behave with appropriate care risk their own lives and the lives of thousands of other people.

There is great value in being appropriately afraid. It shows that we are paying attention to the possible cost involved in whatever is before us. People who feel no fear for themselves and others are not loving; they are self-indulgent, arrogant, haughty and egotistical.

Yes, fear can become out of control, it can take over our lives, and that is not God's will for us. But fear can also give us an opportunity to humble our hearts and seek God's will. To stop for a moment and see our lives, not just in this frightening moment, but in the fullness of God's love for each of us; a love that counts every hair on our heads and knows our needs before we speak them.

When God says, *do not be afraid*, God is not telling us we should never feel fear or that we should pretend that things are other than they are. God is definitely not telling us that we don't need to take the action we can to preserve and honour life (that is why I am talking to this camera while you are sitting at home).

What God is telling us is that our lives are too precious to be ruled by fear. God calls us to live lives that are anchored in God's love; a love that transcends all human circumstances and that remains with us no matter what. That love can give us the courage to face whatever may come and the knowledge that, regardless of outcome, we are safe in God's love that overcomes death.

When God's angel came to Mary, the first thing she was given was a clear picture of her identity before God; *Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.* Mary found this perplexing but I wonder if it was this reminder of who she was that enabled her to listen and accept the rest of the angel's message?

Our only lasting identity is the one we find in our relationship with God. Ultimately nothing else matters; not our marital status, our financial assets, our gender or sexuality, our social connections, our earthly authority; nothing, except who we are in relationship with God.

I'm sure Mary must have feared what the consequences of this unexpected pregnancy would be, but she trusted that she was safe in God regardless of what would unfold. The voice of God, speaking through the angel did not say to her, *do not be afraid because everything is going to be ok.* Instead the voice said, *do not be afraid, for you have found favour with God.* So, trusting that, Mary said *yes* to God, knowing that

she had a part to play in God's plan and that whatever that meant for her, she was willing.

I wonder what would have happened if Mary had focussed on her fear that day, rather than on God's message? What if she had not believed that her true identity was to be found in God? What if instead she had thought about the identity the world gave her, a poor, unmarried girl in a patriarchal society? What if she had not listened to God's voice but to the voice of fear whispering in her ear and persuading her that to say *yes* would be madness?

If that had happened, I imagine the angel would still have delivered God's message. The annunciation would still have taken place. But the incarnation would not have. The incarnation required Mary not to allow her legitimate fear of the future to determine who she would be. The incarnation required Mary's willing *yes* to God; yes, in the midst of fear but safe in the identity given to her by God.

Yes, there is much to fear in our world at the moment and we are more conscious of it than usual. Almost certainly, people we love will die from this virus and we will grieve them, and we will weep and be afraid for others we love. But I hope that, like Mary, as we live in fearful times, we will not allow fear to rule our hearts, because our hearts belong only to the eternal God who has overcome death. I hope that when God whispers to our hearts, we will not allow fear to define who we will be but that we will say *yes* to God and allow something new to be brought to birth in and through us.

Do not be afraid. The Lord is with you and nothing will be impossible with God. Amen.

The Lord be with you.