

Luke 2:1-20
Christmas Eve (B)
Sermon given at Friedens UCC
December 24, 2021

Fear Not!

“Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is (Christ) the Lord.”

Do not be afraid. Fear not! It is often what the angels say. It is how the angel greeted Joseph upon directing him to continue with plans to marry Mary. It is how the angel greeted Mary upon informing her she would have a child. It is how the angel announced the good news of Jesus’ birth to the shepherds out in the fields on that first Christmas.

“Do not be afraid.” That odd, but simple greeting doesn’t downplay, but acknowledges the very real fears of the ones to whom it is spoken: to Mary and Joseph facing existential and ethical dilemmas, to the shepherds whose ordinary lives were confronted with events of cosmic proportions. Of course, they are afraid! And the angels, the messengers of God, acknowledge that fear.

Sarah Henrich notices something in this old, familiar story that might be a reason we long to hear it every year. She notices the movement from fear to joy in the story and calls it a “significant dynamic.” [Sarah Henrich, “Commentary on Luke 2:1-20,” www.workingpreacher.org] The fear in this story is acknowledged and transformed to GREAT JOY! It *is* dynamic. There is this movement.

Isn’t that what we long for, too? When we face existential and ethical dilemmas, and events that are way bigger than our ordinary lives can fathom; when we fear isolation and losing control; sickness and death; insignificance, the unknown; uncertainty; *you* fill in the blank _____ ... the angel reminds *us*, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy, which shall be for *all* people.

In the classic Christmas special, *“A Charlie Brown Christmas,”* this good news is brought to life. That story, too, moves from fear to great joy. I didn’t notice that until I read something one of you posted on Facebook recently. Seeing that post prompted me to watch it again – closely. When I did, I noticed a theme of fear transformed that runs throughout the story. Here is some of what I saw:

Charlie Brown fears there’s something wrong with him because he’s not happy at Christmas when he thinks he “should be.” When he looks in the mailbox and sees that it is empty, he names the fear that nobody likes him, that he is unloved, that he doesn’t matter to anyone. Then there’s the whole scene with Lucy, when she suggests “we must pinpoint your fears” and goes through the whole list of possibilities, all the phobias, until finally she names Pantophobia – the fear of everything and Charlie Brown yells, “THAT’S IT!!!” before they go back to the initial fear that there’s something wrong with him because he’s not happy at Christmas and he concludes, “I just don’t understand Christmas, I guess.” ...which is how he ends up as director of the Christmas play. It’s in the midst of that play that Charlie Brown’s fears are transformed into great joy.

The pivotal moment comes after he and Linus chose a sorry little tree for the play and are laughed off the stage – doesn’t that get at another deep-seated human fear?! – and Charlie Brown says again, “I just don’t understand what Christmas is all about.” “Can’t anyone tell me what Christmas is all about????!!” ...

And Linus takes the stage with his trusty blanket in tow which he has carried to the skating pond, while catching snowflakes on his tongue, while throwing snowballs; while dancing on stage and choosing the tree; for which he has endured taunting from his sister, but undaunted, when she asks what he’ll do with it when he grows up – in other words, doesn’t need it anymore – he says he’ll turn it into a sportcoat. When she orders him to get rid of it for the play, he puts it on his head; it becomes part of who he is as a shepherd. Linus takes the stage with that trusty blanket and is, as C. Clifton Black articulates, “this text’s most memorable preacher.” [C. Clifton Black, “Commentary on Luke 2:1-20,” www.workingpreacher.org]

Everything gets still and quiet as he begins, “And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night...And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone ‘round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord...And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.’” When he finishes reciting the story, Linus proclaims, “That’s what Christmas is all about Charlie Brown” and EVERYTHING SHIFTS.

What Black may not have noticed was that Linus preached that sermon not only in word, but in deed. The Facebook post I mentioned earlier acknowledges that this is a security blanket that Linus carries with him at all times and points out something I had never noticed before. “Linus drops his blanket at the exact moment he says the words, ‘Fear not!’” “Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy...” “(He) drops his blanket at the exact moment he says...‘Fear not!’...(delivering) a powerful reminder...we needn’t rely on material things for security, (for) we have God-with-us, ‘Immanuel,’...Jesus Christ – our Lord and Savior – the true meaning of Christmas...” [Post from Dan Holley borrowed from Charlene M. Speer and ‘Christian Life Ministry’ on Facebook Dec. 9, 2020] He lets go of what he’s holding on to for security to receive true security in the good news of the incarnation of God, God-with-us.

As this post admits and I observed, Linus does pick his blanket back up again as he concludes the reading with the words, “And on earth, peace...”

He lets go of his blanket, that which holds his fears at bay, at the moment God’s messenger says, “Fear Not.” At the moment the angel says, “Fear not,” he lets his fears go and when he picks the blanket up again everything has changed. The fears of all the people have been transformed to great joy.

Charlie Brown picks up the little tree, smiling, and just leaves. He cares for the tree with a new confidence, not worried what others think. That shifts the whole dynamic. The others silently follow. When the tree droops from the weight of that one red ornament and his nagging fear of ruining everything briefly returns, it is transformed in community when all the children – all the people – also see things differently now. Linus takes that blanket that he was holding on to, and not only drops it, but offers it – his most trusted possession – wrapping it around the base of the tree, saying, “Maybe it just needs a little love.” That blanket was love to him. He was wrapping himself in love. Now he’s sharing that love. The group decorates the tree, which now also stands tall, and when Charlie Brown reappears, they sing in great joy together.

Charlie Brown is transformed. Linus is transformed. The blanket is transformed. The tree is transformed. All the children are transformed. The community is transformed. The mood is transformed. Fear is transformed to great joy through this ancient story lived out in community – not only a community of shepherds or cartoon characters, but lived out in the stories of our lives, too.

And the angel said, “Do not be afraid, for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people. To you is born this day...a Savior, who is (Christ) the Lord.” Thanks be to God! Amen.