

# Do Not Be Afraid

*“The angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary. . . .’ Luke 1:30*

The Reverend Luther Zeigler  
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The angel Gabriel knew one thing for sure. This poor, young woman would likely be scared out of her wits. I mean, who wouldn't be? It is not every day that an angel appears uninvited at your door. And so, upon his arrival, Gabriel does what God's messengers always do in the Bible. He reassures her. “Do not be afraid, Mary,” the angel says.

All of us are afraid of something, aren't we? To be human is to be afraid. Some of us are afraid of speaking in public or being in the spotlight. Some of us fear heights. Others fear spiders. Or snakes. Some people fear being alone. Most of us fear failure or rejection or not being liked by others.

I'll let you in on a little secret from my childhood. When I was a little boy I was terrified of the water. To this day I can remember going to the local swimming pool with my mother when I was first learning to swim. I was probably four or five years old. Eager to teach me how to swim, she asked me to stand on the side of the pool, and then she waded out into the middle of the pool, maybe 10 feet from the side. The water wasn't that deep, maybe four feet or so, but to a little boy like me it seemed almost bottomless.

So, there I was standing on the side of the pool looking into the great, blue depths of the water, with my mother standing in the middle of the pool signaling for me to jump. “Just jump and start swimming over to me! I'll catch you if you aren't able to make it,” she assured me.

But I was frozen with fear. I just stood there on the side, staring into the abyss of the water, terrified that I would drown if I jumped, that I wouldn't be able to swim, that I would humiliate myself. I can still feel the fear of that moment in the pit of my stomach.

Eventually, of course, I somehow overcame that fear and jumped. It wasn't pretty, I'm sure. The first few times, I flailed wildly, gasping for air, as my head would bob in and out of the water. But sure enough, true to her word, my mother would always come to my rescue, gently gripping me with her hands under my arms. And

with each successive jump, I learned more and more to trust her. Until, gradually, I stopped being afraid.

This is a simplistic example, perhaps; a child's fear. And I'm mindful of the fact that many of us come to church this morning with the more grievous fears of adulthood. The fear that accompanies a bad diagnosis. The fear that a daughter or son is on a wayward and self-destructive path. The fear that a marriage may be falling apart. The fear that a job is not working out or may soon evaporate. And, of course, we fear that our world is being swallowed up, and our hospitals overrun, by a virus spinning out of control. Our fears are many.

Even so, the example of a child learning to overcome the fear of drowning by trusting his mother holds a key, I think, for understanding something about unlocking our fears. For, the thing about fear is that we can't think our way out of it on our own. Rather, overcoming fear is about letting go; it is about recognizing that we are not in control of everything; it is about surrendering ourselves to something or someone much bigger than ourselves, surrendering ourselves to the care of someone who loves us so much that she or he won't let us go.

This, of course, is also the logic of faith. And today we witness an extraordinary example of that in Mary's profoundly simple act of trust in Gabriel's message from God. She somehow found the courage to let go of her fears, and to surrender herself to God's care. She took a remarkable leap of faith, believing that God would be with her, come what may, and that God would be ever faithful to her.

But notice this about Mary's faith. It begins with Gabriel's message from God: "Fear not, Mary." Mary's act of faith is made possible, is catalyzed, by God's invitation to let go of her fear.

We hear this divine reassurance time and again in the Bible:

When Moses is becoming nervous about the dangers of leading his people out of Egypt, God says, "Fear not. I will be with you."

When the Israelites are in exile, quaking before the might of a cruel and overwhelmingly powerful enemy, the Lord God reminds them: "Fear not. I will be with you."

In our darkest moments, we cling to the words of the Twenty-third psalm: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me."

And then, later in Luke's nativity story, to shepherds startled in the middle of the night by a bright light and angel choruses, we hear the words again: "Fear not."

And finally, at the very end of Jesus' story, to frightened disciples at an open tomb, this same message: "Fear not. He is not here. He is risen."

There is a profound sense in which one of the overriding themes of Scripture is this exhortation to let go of the fears the grip us.

And yet there is a crucial corollary to all this: To say that we should let go of our fears, and place our trust in God, does *not* mean that our lives will then suddenly become easy or free from suffering and loss. God does not promise us particular outcomes. Indeed, God does not even promise us that what we fear will not come to pass. What He does promise us, though, is that if we place our trust in His abiding presence, then ultimately *God will see us through our fears; not around them, but through them.*

Mary came to know this truth all too well, of course. Her destiny, as we know, would be to watch her Son grow up, only to leave home to pursue a dangerous ministry among outcasts, preaching love to a cruel and violent world. And then, in the end, Mary would have to endure every mother's worst nightmare: the horror of watching her Son die a premature death, on a Cross no less. Being human, I'm sure that Mary had her moments when her faith wavered, when she thought that God had abandoned her, moments when her fears returned and threatened to overwhelm her faith. But painful as this must have been for her, God led her through these fears to the glory of the other side of the Cross.

Let us not forget, too, that even Jesus, who was fully human after all, himself experienced profound fear. As C. S. Lewis once put it: "In Gethsemane, gripped by a fear of what might lie ahead, the holiest of all petitioners prayed three times that a certain cup might pass from Him. And yet it did not."

And then, of course, more profoundly still, we remember Jesus' cries of dereliction from the Cross. As the Letter to the Hebrews puts it, on the Cross, Jesus "offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the only one who could save him from death." And when Jesus prayed to be saved from these fears of death, he did not get the reprieve he expected; what he received, instead, was the salvation of the whole world.

Jesus was saved from his fears, you see, only not in the way he or anyone else expected. And so too will we be saved from our fears, if not always in the ways we hope or expect.

For, as the Blessed Virgin Mary herself eventually ultimately came to learn, the good news is this: there is one story, and only one story, that will fully and finally dispel all of our fears. And that is the story of God becoming one of us in Christ; sharing in our struggles as well as our joys; teaching us the possibilities for truly authentic and loving human relationships; healing the sick and tending to the wounded; freely subjecting himself to the humiliation, pain and death of a violent world of our own making; and then overcoming that violence and death in the ultimate act of love embodied in the Resurrection.

With that saving story close to our hearts, then, let us pray for God's help so that we too may keep our fears at bay, and learn to trust in God's guiding and ever-faithful hand. And toward that end, I know of no better prayer to conclude our time together than this very honest, very humble, and very real prayer by the late Thomas Merton. Let us pray:

*"My Lord God, I have no idea where we are going. I do not see the road ahead. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always. And even when I seem to be lost and find myself in the shadow of death, I will not fear, for I know you are ever with me, and that you will never leave me to face my perils alone. This I pray in Christ's name and for your love's sake. Amen."*