

4th Sunday of Advent, 2017
St. Mary's Catholic Church, Richmond VA
Fr. Michael Renninger

Be not afraid, I go before you always, come follow me, and I will give you rest.

Whenever I get called to go to a home or hospital to celebrate the sacrament of the anointing of the sick, I conclude that powerful prayer by singing to the person. Sometimes, I sing, “*And he will raise you up on eagles’ wings,*” and other times I sing “*Be not afraid...*”

That singing can be particularly powerful if the person we are praying for is very near to death. I remember being called to anoint a woman who had made a long, hard journey with cancer.

On a dark winter night several years ago, I got the call: “Father, can you come? There’s not much time.”

When I got to her room, I surveyed the scene. The woman was there in the bed, still able to recognize people, but obviously struggling for breath.

Her parents were there. Her husband. Her three children – ages 11, 9 and 6. Her best friend from childhood. A brother from Nebraska.

I gathered the family around her bed. We all reached out and touched her. She knew that she was loved. She knew she was not alone.

I lead everyone in the anointing prayers. Then I leaned over and started to sing, “*Be not afraid...*” She moved her lips, whispering the words along with me. We all cried.

And when the song was over, the woman whispered to me: “I am not afraid. Look at the people in this room. They all love me and I love them. And love is stronger than fear.”

She died 45 minutes later. But years later, I remember her last words to me: *Love is stronger than fear.*

Have you ever noticed? Every time an angel appears in the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ birth, the angel says the same thing: “Don’t be afraid.” That may tell us something about what angels really look like!

But it may also tell us that God understands us very well. God understands that, in this world,

there are so many things that make us...afraid.

But angels also remind us – *love is stronger than fear.*

The angel Gabriel appears to Mary in today's Gospel, and says to her, "Don't be afraid Mary. You've found favor with God." In other words – "Don't be afraid Mary. God loves you more than you can imagine."

And yet, even after the angel has told Mary that God wants her to be the mother of Jesus... even after her questions are asked and answered... there is still so much that Mary COULD have been afraid of!

+ If she says 'yes' and allows God to take flesh in her womb, how will she explain this to her parents? "Mom. Dad. I'm pregnant..." To which dad might ask, "Who is the father?" And Mary would have to answer – "*He was an angel.*" Was she afraid of telling her parents?

+ Was she afraid of trying to explain this to Joseph? "Yes, Joseph, we had lots of plans for our wedding... but there's something you need to know..."

Was she afraid of telling her parents and Joseph? She SHOULD have been afraid of the fact that there were Old Testament passages saying that a woman who gets pregnant prior to living with her husband could be stoned to death for her immorality! Her life was in danger! She SHOULD be afraid!

But, as that woman said to me in the hospital years ago: *love is stronger than fear.*

Mary stood at the brink of her life. The angel told her not to be afraid... but the angel's message had frightening implications! Yet Mary *jumped in...* she said *yes* to this pregnancy, *yes* to God's plan.

How did she do it?

Love it stronger than fear! She trusted that God loved her beyond her imagining. She loved God. So she was not controlled by fear – she said 'yes,' *freely*, because of love.

And this is not the last time that Mary might be afraid. Was she afraid when she found out that Herod was trying to kill Jesus? Was she afraid when she and Joseph lost Jesus in the temple? Was she afraid when he started preaching, and immediately the authorities got mad at him? Was she afraid when he was arrested? Was she afraid as she watched him die?

And yet...at every frightening, confusing, heartbreaking turn, Mary kept saying 'yes.' Yes to God. Yes to Jesus. Love is stronger than fear.

So, what are you *afraid* of on this last full day of Advent? What part of your life is confusing, heartbreaking, worrying? What is the source of your anxiety?

Are you afraid of how things will go with your relatives at Christmas, because you don't have a perfect family? Will you be stressing this Christmas?

Are you afraid that your faith is faltering or unfocused?

Are you afraid of the economy? Or Isis? Or North Korea?

If you are a police officer or member of the military, are you afraid today?

Are you afraid that Santa won't bring you everything that you put on your list?

Are you afraid that life is not unfolding in the way that you had planned?

Are you afraid because someone you love is very sick, someone you love is not here, someone you love has broken your heart, someone you love is hurting?

Are you afraid that your *marriage* is in trouble, that your *kids* are in trouble, that *you* are in trouble?

We could choose to listen only to the voice of our fears, or...

... we can listen to the angel, and follow the example of Mary. *Do not be afraid.* How? Remember that *God's love is stronger than your fear.*

Don't focus on your *fear* – focus on your *Father in heaven.*

Don't stare at what *scares* you – start seeing Christ's *spirit* at work in you.

Don't keep looking at the *pain* – look at the *people* around you who are a blessing.

Don't gaze into a worrisome future – pay attention to the present moment, where Christ lives in you.

Don't count up how many things have NOT gone right this year – count the blessings God *has*

given you since last Christmas. Don't be controlled by the people who have let you down, celebrate the Lord who gives you a chance to love the people right in front of you.

Don't let fear of the future rob you of the simple joys of *this day*.

Your spiritual assignment for the last hours of Advent is simple – *look* at the *love* that is in your life... the love that Christ sends to you in simple ways. Let yourself be loved.

Love is stronger than fear. Love is very near. Love is here, in this Church, in this Good News, in this Breaking of the Bread. So... Be not afraid.

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