

First Sunday of Advent, 2018
St. Mary's Catholic Church, Richmond VA
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"Aren't you afraid?" That's what the lady said to a priest who was at the grocery store, buying food for Thanksgiving.

The woman walked up to the priest. She looked at him, standing there in his Roman Collar, and she said to him, "Aren't you afraid?"

The priest said to her, "I'm sorry, ma'am. What should I be afraid of?"

And she said, "Aren't you afraid that people will know that you're a Catholic. And, even worse, you're one of them priests who abuses children?"

The priest said to her, "I want everyone to know I'm a Catholic, and I love being a priest."

She said, "I just don't know how you can be part of a church that has such sinners in it."

And the priest said to her, "I don't belong to a *church* that is perfect. I belong to a *God* who is perfect. And I am not a priest because the *church* is sinless – I'm a priest because *Christ* is sinless. The crimes of individuals are horrible. But I belong to a God who loves all of his children, even the criminals."

The woman looked at him and said, "If I were you, I couldn't appear in public dressed like that." And she walked away.

The priest was stunned by this encounter. He sighed. His shoulders slumped, and his head drooped. Just then, he noticed an older African American gentleman stocking the shelves to his left. The man had heard the whole encounter. And the man looked at the priest and he said, "Stand up straight, like a man full of courage."

Standing up straight, like a man full of courage.

Right now, in so many aspects of our daily life, it seems that there are lots of people who are coming up to us, saying "Aren't you afraid?" Accusers and prophets of doom gladly repeat their message, "You *should* be afraid. Hunker down. Hide. Everything is horrible, and it's going to get even worse."

Maybe they don't come up to you in the grocery store. Maybe the voices are not the voice of someone else – maybe the voice is in our own head. But there you are, buying food for

Thanksgiving, and someone demands, “Aren’t you afraid?”

On this first weekend of Advent, our Gospel reading speaks of the coming of Christ – but not the coming of the Christ *child*. The coming of Christ described in Luke’s Gospel is not the one that happens in a manger, on a silent night. We will focus on *that* coming of Christ later in Advent.

Rather, the coming of Christ described in Luke’s Gospel is the *second* coming, the final coming, when the world as we know it is transformed by the judgment and victory of God.

To describe *that* coming, Jesus uses the kind of dramatic language his disciples would have expected.

Jesus says, “There will be signs in the heavens, and the nations will be in dismay, people will die of fright. This day will assault everyone on earth, so don’t be drunk and drowsy! Be ready for the tribulation!”

Frankly, none of that sounds like fun, does it? When I hear such predictions, I can feel... (what’s the word?) ... *afraid!*

But notice one more thing that Jesus says as he describes this dramatic and dangerous time. Jesus says to his followers: “When all of this is happening, stand up straight – stand erect – and raise your head. Because your salvation is at hand.”

“Stand up straight. Hold your head up!”

Hmm. Where have we heard that before? Has anyone ever encouraged you with similar words?

My father said that to me the day that I got hurt playing baseball. I was in so much pain, yet I did not want the other boys to see that I was crying. My dad checked on me and dried my tears. I stood there with my head down. That’s when dad said, “Stand up straight. Hold your head high.” He gave me confidence, and courage.

Courageous people inspire us, and give us hope. Like when Rocky has been knocked to the mat, and the referee is counting him out. Then, he summons the strength and courage to push himself up, and the music swells, and he stands up straight, and raises his head, and you can see the courage on his face, and the crowd cheers!

Stand up straight, raise your head. I see that kind of courage when someone is struggling in the hospital with a serious medical issue. The nurse comes in and says, “Do you think you can stand and take a little walk?” And even though the person is in obvious pain, with Christ’s help they

stand up straight, and raise their head, and walk out the door.

I see it in young gymnast... who falls off the beam. And then they stand up straight, and raise their head. And get back on. Courage.

I see it in the woman or man who just lost their spouse or their child. And every fiber of their being is screaming, "I will never be able to live without them." But with Christ's help they stand up straight, raise their heads, and courageously find a way forward.

I see it in those who face depression, or addiction, or betrayal... and the struggle is so difficult. But with Christ's help they stand up straight and raise their heads, and face the day.

And I see it firefighters risking their lives in California. I see it in those who faithfully work to show expectant mothers that there is an alternative to abortion. I see it in those who courageously work to bring justice where there is none, to serve the poor when it would be easy not to.

Previous generations have read this Gospel passage, and some people have wondered: is the fearful end happening now? Should *we* be afraid? Previous generations had their struggles, perils and their strife. *We* have ISIS, and terror, and conflict. *We* have migrations due to poverty and war. *We* have political divides, dangerous events, personal tragedies.

But Jesus makes it clear: in the face of difficulties, Christians are not called to hunker down, hide behind walls, give into fear, hand our hearts over to hate, lower our heads and stay out of the way.

Jesus said, "Stand up straight, and hold your head up!"

A Christian full of fear, or a church full of fear, is a contradiction in terms. Instead, with Christ's help we can stand up straight, have courage, and proclaim the resurrection.

And if you find yourself standing in the grocery aisle, not sure how to move forward, think about this crucifix. This crucifix, which boldly proclaims that our God has conquered death. If he's conquered that, then nothing on earth can conquer us for eternity.

Listen to that Lord, and learn from him. What a great way to begin Advent. What a great way to prepare for Christmas. What a great way to be strengthened by the mercy of the Lord.

Listen and learn from the Lord. Then stand up straight, courageously hold your head up, knowing that Christ is with you.

Some may think you're crazy. But we'll know that you're courageous... in Christ.

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