

Do Not Be Afraid

Did you grow up reading Charles Schultz's iconic comic strip, *Peanuts*? I did. I still like to watch Charlie Brown holiday specials on TV. In one of those shows, good old Charlie Brown is feeling kind of depressed. So he stops by Lucy's psychologist booth, hoping she can help him.

After collecting her fee up front—a nickel—Lucy asks, “Now what seems to be your trouble? The mere fact that you realize you need help indicates that you are not too far gone. I think we'd better pinpoint your fears. If we can find out what you're afraid of, we can label it.

Are you afraid of responsibility? If you are, then you have hypengyophobia.

How about cats? If you're afraid of cats, you have ailurophasia.

Are you afraid of staircases? If you are, then you have climachaphobia.

Maybe you have thalassophobia. This is a fear of the ocean.

Or gephyrobia, which is the fear of crossing bridges.

Or maybe you have pantophobia. Do you think you have pantophobia?”

Charlie Brown wonders, “What’s pantophobia?”

Lucy replies, “The fear of everything.”

And Charlie Brown exclaims, “That’s *it!*”

Do you sometimes identify with Charlie Brown? Does he strike a chord in you? I think all of us—at one time or another—have shared Charlie Brown’s feelings. Anxiety and fear are part of our human condition. We’re in the world. A world in which accidents and natural disasters and acts of violence have been happening since ancient times and are still happening in our own time. Do you think these events are more frequent today than they used to be? Or, in this age of instantaneous electronic communication, do we just *hear* about more of them? And hear about them more quickly?

Whichever the case, feeling anxious and afraid just seems to go with the territory of being in the world today. Sometimes our anxieties and fears seem to take on a life of their own, in a quirky, superstitious kind of way. Like when a person carries an umbrella—on a sunny day—just to make sure it doesn’t rain. Because when bad things *do* happen, they’re often things we haven’t seen

coming and, therefore, haven't *worried* about. So sometimes we use our anxieties as a kind of protective buffer to keep at bay the scary things that seem to lurk around every corner. Sometimes worry and fear keep us awake at night. Sometimes they can even make us physically ill.

But today, in Luke's Gospel, Jesus has a word for us on the subject of fear. This Sunday, it's the very first thing he tells us. We hear him say: *Do not be afraid*.

Do not be afraid. Today Jesus talks about things we're fearful of. About things that make us afraid.

Jesus, who knows all about us, knows that we live in a market-driven society. Advertisers have become quite adept at getting us to feel anxious about things like aging and loneliness and accidents and illness. And then persuading us that the way to relieve our fears—that the way to be youthful and popular and safe and healthy—is to purchase whatever they're selling.

And Jesus also knows that once we've acquired these possessions, we're plagued by the nagging fear that we'll lose them. That they'll be taken away. So, in our homes and businesses and sometimes even in our churches, we lock doors and we install security systems and we put up fences and we build walls. To

safeguard treasure that too often claims our energies and efforts. This earthly treasure that we're so afraid of losing, according to the One who tells us: *Do not be afraid*.

This is the One who reminds us that he, our Master, will one day return to us, his servants. We don't know the day or the hour. But Christ *will* come again—this same Christ who loves us so much that he willingly died for us. This Christ whose life among us was a perfect expression of grace and healing, of pardon and forgiveness.

But instead of looking forward to the second coming of this Christ with hope and glad expectation, do we *dread* it? Somewhere along the way, many of us have gotten the idea that he will return not to bless, but to punish. And I wonder: If that's what we truly believe, do we worship and serve God in Christ Jesus because we fear the ultimate punishment? Because we're afraid of being condemned to hell? Is it because we're persons of faith, or because we're fearful of not having *fire insurance* that we call ourselves Christians, that we bear the name of Christ? The very One who reassures us: *Do not be afraid*?

Jesus is also the One who warns us about a thief coming to our door. Thieves frighten us. But, as Alyce McKenzie points out,

that thief at the door is *fear*! And we do know when that thief named fear is coming. Not at some time in the future. *Now*! That thief is here now. Fear is a thief because it immobilizes. It paralyzes. Fear robs us of the ability to live fully in each present moment. Fear robs us of the peace that transcends understanding. Fear robs us of the joy that wells up from deep within. Fear robs us of gratitude for these good gifts and for *every* good gift God has given. Ultimately, fear robs us of our faith. Franklin Delano Roosevelt affirmed that *we have nothing to fear but fear itself*.

And Jesus says: *Do not be afraid*. He calls you and me to be not fearful, but active. He tells us to be ready and dressed for action. Jesus recalls—as we do—the words of the prophet Isaiah. These words we hear today reveal a compelling and humbling truth: God isn't looking only at what we do *inside* the sanctuary. Isaiah's scathing words confront us with the reality that God rejects as insincere and hypocritical any worship that isn't followed by what *really* matters to God.

My brothers and sisters, what really matters to God is our actions—outside these sanctuary walls. What really matters to God is how engaged we are in caring for the ones God loves, especially those forgotten by the rest of the world. What really

matters to God is how committed we are to seeking justice for the oppressed and the poor. What really matters to God is how willing we are to give and to save and to give all we can to those who lack life's basic necessities. What really matters to God is how passionate we are in loving God's children who stand in need.

It's love, perfect love, that casts out fear.

Do not be afraid. This isn't the first time in Luke's Gospel that we've heard these words.

We've heard them spoken to a frightened teenage girl. *Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.*

We've heard them spoken to terrified shepherds. *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...*

And today we hear that Savior—*our* Savior—say these same words—to the twelve and to us. *Do not be afraid.* Whenever we hear these words, we're beginning to understand that what comes after them is going to be good news. The best news. Astounding, stupendous, life-changing news!

What follows these words today is no exception. What follows these words is a promise made by Jesus himself. And he who has promised is faithful. Our own faith is grounded in this

very promise: it is God's pleasure—God's delight!—to give you the kingdom. God's desire and good intention is to give you an eternal kingdom. Yours to enter! Not on a distant someday, but now. Today.

Today we hear that the Master is returning from a wedding celebration [in many ways, not unlike the wedding celebration that will take place here this afternoon.] The Master is returning from a wedding feast. And today he gives you a pledge, a foretaste, of that great heavenly banquet. Today *he serves you*. Today he offers you his body and his blood. Today he offers you himself. Today he offers you new life in him.

A new life, a new way of living that releases you, that sets you free from every fear that's haunted you. For even though you're *in* the world, you are not *of* the world. You are a disciple of Jesus Christ.

So trust in his promise, beloved. Believe it! Claim it! Walk joyously into life with him, and *do not be afraid*. For in Jesus Christ, treasure is yours—all the treasure your heart can ever hold.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.