

Homily at St. John in the Wilderness  
Sunday, March 16, 2025  
Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18, Psalm 27, Philippians 3:17-4:1, Luke 13:31-35  
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*“The Lord is my light and my salvation; who then shall I fear?”*

There she was - just doing what she did every day - maybe cooking a meal or cleaning up the house or getting ready to fetch some water from the well. It was an ordinary day soon to become extraordinary.

For this young, unmarried peasant woman looked across the room and saw something she had never experienced or probably thought about before - an angel - standing right there in her living room! And the angel spoke to Mary saying, “Be not afraid.”

About nine months later... while tending their sheep out in a field near Bethlehem, there was another angelic appearance, this time to the shepherds. Like the angel had said to Mary, the shepherds also heard the words, “Be not afraid,” followed by extraordinary news of a baby that had just been born.

There are many references in the Bible, both new and old testaments, of angelic beings delivering messages from God to a variety of people. And usually, perhaps because the sight of them was so startling, they began their message with the words, “Be not afraid.”

And these were the words God used when he spoke with Abram, later known as Abraham, about 2000 years before the birth of Jesus - found in our scripture today. "Be not afraid, Abram. I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you." Now this is not the first time God had spoken with Abraham. He had gotten a similar message awhile ago that God would make of him a great nation and that the land in Canaan would be his on which to settle. And I am sure Abraham had been pondering that message for some time. He saw that the reality of his situation didn't quite fall in line with the divine promise that had been made.

First of all, his wife, Sarai, renamed by God Sarah, was way past the usual childbearing years, so he couldn't understand how she could bear him a child to start this great nation he had been promised. In fact, God had him look up at the night sky to the thousands of stars and said his descendants will number more than these. Also, he had traveled to Canaan as he had been instructed, but there were already folks there. Was this land really to be his?

One thing was for certain, if he fathered a child with Sarah and if he ultimately possessed the promised land, it would be unquestionably an act of God that would make it happen.

Now Abraham is known for his faith. Today, many of us think that faith is, as one commentator writes, "only unquestioning acceptance or silent submission." We think that If you question God, you have no faith. But Abraham questioned God often. And Abraham's faith made him righteous in the eyes of God.

Now how could Abraham be righteous when we know he was not perfect. He often made mistakes and sometimes broke the rules and we can read about all that in the book of Genesis. But God saw deep into Abraham's heart and knew that he was, down deep, a man of principle and that he truly loved and obeyed God. Abraham "got it" - even in his imperfection. And God called him righteous, not perfect, but righteous because of that.

Jesus, living about 2000 years after Abraham, also broke some norms and rules and he did it to usher in a different, a healthy, a godly way to live with God and neighbor and that, as we know, got him in incredible trouble with the authorities of the day.

In order for the Roman Emperor, at that time, to rule such a large area of land and all the divergent people who lived in those lands, he demanded that peace be kept - the Pax Romana. What that meant was that everyone was expected to be allegiant to Rome and follow the rules and values of the Emperor. Deviation from this was not tolerated. And local leaders such as Herod and Pilate were to enforce this compliance.

Jesus did not comply. In today's world he might have been considered a rebel, fired from his job, or even sent to prison, but death on a cross was his sentence. In our gospel today we see that he was warned about the danger of continuing his healing and preaching and teaching. He was aware of the consequences of his actions; he was not naive of the politics of the day. He was aware that many prophets had met death in the city to which he would travel. He was warned that Herod was out to kill him.

But, instead of stopping his divine work, the work God had given him to do, he grieved over the city where his life would be ended, “Jerusalem Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.” Jesus, obedient and faithful always to God, continued his journey to Jerusalem despite what awaited him. Did he fear? Was he afraid? We don’t know, but what we do know is that if he was, it didn’t stop him from his godly mission.

Stephen and I were ordering coffee at a coffee house the other day when I spotted a t-shirt on one of the employees. The shirt said, “Faith over Fear.” What a great title that would be for our Psalm today - Psalm 27. For the psalmist is quite aware of the problems of the world and the trouble that surrounds him as he writes. And he experiences fear. But he is also quite aware of God and has great faith that God will be there for him no matter what problems assail him. Faith over fear.

He says, “The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom then shall I be afraid?” The Psalmist is aware that there are actually two kingdoms in this world - the one we see and do our daily business in and the one we have not seen, but believe in our hearts - the kingdom of God. And the Lord of the Kingdom of God - in his love for us so great that words can not describe it - stands by us throughout the dangers and setbacks of our earthly life. And so his angels can say very honestly to us, “Be not afraid.”

Can we relate what this Psalmist says to our world situation? Yes.

We don't know exactly what enemies were assailing the Psalmist when he writes, "And though war should rise up against me, yet will I put my trust in God."

But we do know a number of places in our own world where there is continued war with fighting and bombing and killing and breaking of promises as one nation seeks to possess the nation of another. We see on the news the fear and death of our brothers and sisters and the devastation of their lands.

We are aware of the thousands of people in our own country whose jobs have suddenly been eliminated and left them with no income, huge mortgages, and little hope. And as we hear them report their circumstances, we can see the fear on their faces and hear it in their voices.

The Psalmist continues, "Though an army should encamp against me, yet my heart shall not be afraid." We know that there are many people in our own country who are afraid for their lives. Children are not attending school regularly and preparations are being made for families to go into hiding. Few if any from this congregation are living with this same fear, but we probably know some who are. They are our brothers and sisters who cut our grass, roof our homes, tend to our friends and loved ones in assisted living facilities, and pick our apples in the fall.

Of course we all know the fear of many who sit at the bedside of their loved ones, watching their health decline, and wondering how they will live without this person in their lives.

Truly armies of all sorts do encamp against us today.

But the Psalmist does not leave us in despair. Despite all the problems he is facing, he knows and trusts that God is present in his life and prays to God for help in his time of dire trouble. He is living in a world gone mad, but he is aware that there is another kingdom out there where help can be found - the Kingdom of God.

He says to God, "Hide not your face from me, nor turn away your servant in displeasure. You have been my helper; cast me not away; do not forsake me, O God of my salvation. Though my father and my mother forsake me, the Lord will sustain me. Show me your way, O Lord; lead me on a level path."

Some days it seems like we, also, are living in a world gone mad. And it is in times like these that we need to pray unceasingly and step up as God calls us and tend to the needs of our brothers and sisters. After all, what hands and feet does Jesus the Christ have but ours to comfort our fellow travelers. Who is it but us who can bring the sorrowful and destitute God's message of hope and love - even as enemies circle around them and they are so fearful.

And, who knows, someday a person with whom we are sharing the gospel of love in whatever form that might be may look up at us and think we are that angel, that bearer of God's message who visited Mary and the shepherds and Abraham long ago. And they would be right. **Amen.**

