

“Do Not be Afraid”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina

December 24, 2005

Text: “But the angel said to them, ‘do not be afraid’ for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people” (Luke 2:10).

When Bob Seiple, the President of World Vision, returned to the United States from Rwanda in 1995, he spoke about what he called “a crisis of faith” that he had experienced in Africa. He told of standing on a bridge one day during the massacres in Rwanda and watching thousands of bodies float beneath him on a river scarlet with their blood. With machetes Hutu tribesmen had hacked to death almost a million Tutsis--their neighbors, their fellow parishioners, their school classmates--for reasons no one could fully explain.

For Seiple the crisis of faith was trying to understand the presence of evil in the world. What causes, he wondered, humans to turn against each other in such violent ways? How do we explain the presence of suicide bombers who fly airplanes into villages or blow up innocent people at weddings and funerals?

In his book *The Powers That Be*, theologian Walter Wink insists that when the New Testament speaks of “principalities and powers,” it is speaking of something that cannot be described in the reductionist language of sociology, politics, and depth psychology. There is something in the world in which we live, observed Wink, which strikes great fear in the heart of every one of us.

I.

One of the most remarkable, but less known, aspects of the Christmas story, is the element of fear. It is present from the beginning. When the angel appeared to Mary to tell her that she has found favor with God and that the child in her womb is to be called “Jesus,” the angel begins by saying, “Do not be afraid” (Luke 1: 30:-31). In like manner, when an angel approaches Joseph to tell him that the woman to whom he is engaged is pregnant with the child of God, the angel begins by saying to Joseph, “Do not be afraid” (Matthew 1: 20-21). The same is true of the shepherds. When the angel hosts appear to these shepherds in the field, the first words spoken are: “Do not be afraid.”

But that refrain is not only present at the birth of Christ. It is found throughout the entire New Testament. When the disciples saw Jesus walking on the water, the first word he said to them, “Do not be afraid” (John 6:16-21). When Jesus bade farewell to his disciples, he said to them, “Let not your hearts be troubled. Neither let them be afraid” (John 14:27). In the book Revelation John describes a vision of God on the throne saying, “Do not be afraid. I have the keys of death and hell” (Revelation 1:7). From the beginning to the end of the New Testament, from Christmas to Easter to eternity, there is this great and apparently necessary reassurance: “Do Not Be Afraid”.

II.

For one thing, we do not have to be afraid of life. One of the great fears we have is the fear of anonymity. Often we wonder if our lives make any difference. Will anyone remember that we were here or will all be forgotten? It has been almost fifteen years since Elie Wiesel spoke in this church as part of what was called “The Uptown Forum,” but I remember it as if it were yesterday. We had signed a contract with his agent that stipulated many conditions for his coming here, but what I remember most about him was his great humility. For almost an hour he sat with me in my office before he was scheduled to speak in the sanctuary. As he reflected on his life, the one theme I remembered was his great fear that the holocaust would be forgotten. He said that every speech he had ever given, every book written, was an attempt to be a “witness” to the unspeakable horror of Auschwitz and the concentration camps. His great fear was that one day it would all be forgotten.

One of the great insights of the Christmas story in Luke’s gospel is the great irony of the characters of Christmas. The story of Christ echoes the Magnificat of Mary. The lowly are exalted; the high are brought low. Luke frames the story of the birth of Christ in such fashion. It all takes place under the reign of the great Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus. Augustus prided himself on the Roman power and the “Pax Romana.” It was he who sent out the edict of taxation. Unwittingly, Augustus put into motion the great drama of the birth of the Prince of Peace. So

Mary and Joseph leave their home in Nazareth to go to Judea and the city of Bethlehem. There the Christ was born. So a child is born, not in a palace, but in a manger. The main characters in this story are not generals and world lords but shepherds, angels, wise men, a mother, father, and a child. The song of Mary is brought about. The lowly are lifted up. The mighty are brought low. Those who were afraid they had been left out were included.

“Perfect love,” writes the author of I John, “casts out all fear.” The birth of Christ is a witness to that reality.

III.

Then, too, we do not have to be afraid of God. In his book, *Letter to a Man in the Fire*, Reynolds Price notes that in the decades that he has taught university students he has noted how many young people make choices in their lives that have disastrous effects. Price puts it like this: “I am always shocked to be reminded how many people choose, quite early in their lives, to begin their deaths--and death is by no means always a mere cessation of heart and brain activity. Anyone who has taught in college, as I have for four decades well knows that a number of people choose lifelong mental and spiritual death in late adolescence, if not sooner--the curse of surrender to the backwash of time and the all but irreparable friction of trifling or too demanding human interactions.”

“Where sin abounds,” writes the Apostle Paul, “grace abounds even more.” That is what makes the Christmas story so powerful. It reminds us of the great separation that exists between our creator and us. But it also reminds us that the separation has been bridged--not by us--that would be impossible--but by God. He has entered into our world. We did not find him. He found us. He did so by being born in a manger in a stable in the middle of nowhere.

And because he did, we celebrate the season. God is with us. O come let us adore him.

Amen!