Dr. Suzanne Allen

First UMC

Springboro, Ohio

December 13, 2015

Worship Series: “Listening to the Angels”

Message: “Do Not Be Afraid”

Scripture: Luke 1:26-55

During this season of Advent, we are listening to the words of the angels. Of the angels, Gabriel is the head messenger. Last week we considered his words to Zechariah.

Whenever angels show up in scripture, they have a particular tendency to preface their words with the statement, “Do not be afraid.” This is true in their appearances to Zechariah, Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds.

“Do not be afraid.”

“Of what?” We might ask. There is nothing that makes us nervous like someone telling us not to be afraid.

Are they supposed to not be afraid of the fact that there is a pretty fierce looking angel talking to them? That doesn’t happen just every day. Or are they supposed to not be afraid of what the angel is going to say? Or maybe of what they will be asked to do?

“Do not be afraid.”

Maybe it’s all of the above.

Or maybe angels just know what we’re like as humans. Maybe they know that, generally speaking, we are always afraid of something. Maybe they know that too often fear motivates us in ways that aren’t good for us, that go against logic and common sense. Maybe their most important role is to push us to live in faith rather than in fear, to be courageous rather than cowardly.

Their job begins with these words of courage and conviction: “Do not be afraid.”

Fear is an interesting thing to reflect on. In Children’s Church each October, we learn the Bible verse, “I trust in God and am not afraid.” We talk about fear and how God gives us brains to help us understand whether our fear is helping us to know things like not to run out onto a busy road or to play with fire, or whether it’s something that we don’t need to be afraid of, like someone dressed in a scary costume.

As a way of practicing trusting God rather than our fear, we sing the Veggie Tales song, “God is Bigger than the Boogeyman.”

Learning how to use our brains and our hearts together so that we trust in God rather than letting fear rule the day is hard, and not just when we’re in preschool. In fact it gets harder as we become the ones responsible for so much in our lives.

We have to practice trusting God regularly. Because the thing about fear is that it is good at sneaking in the back door or the window or the basement…especially the basement.

I keep thinking our basement is free of the boogeyman but apparently he keeps sneaking back in there. It doesn’t help that even the dog agrees and refuses to go down there at all.

Fear comes in all shapes and sizes and expresses itself in all sorts of ways from trembling to over aggressiveness and hyper judgment.

And when we don’t have a good handle on our fears, when we don’t practice our ability to trust in God rather than ourselves, our abilities, our fears tend to take over. We trust them more than God, more than the voices speaking about love around us. We then overreact, act irrationally in ways that are out of line with what we really believe. We hurt those we know and love or those that others know and love, and we limit what is possible.

As the angel messengers arrive on the Advent scene, they offer a clear and consistent word. “Do not be afraid.” Do not let fear rule the day.

These words were not just for a chosen few people long ago. They are powerful, critical words for us today. The story of Emmanuel, Jesus who is God with us, working in our lives and in our world in powerful ways is one we need to hear as a truth that is more powerful than any of our fears, more powerful than anyone who is the source of our fears.

Our fears are real. They are based in situations that are much more real than the boogeyman.

We’re afraid personally of not being enough, doing enough, having enough. We’re afraid of not being noticed, but also, of being noticed. We’re afraid of failure. We’re afraid of what others think of us.

We’re afraid communally, of others, especially those who don’t look or think or act like us. We’re afraid of trusting them, depending on them, of sharing what we have with them. We’re afraid of the changes in our country, in our world. It’s all happening so quickly. We hardly have time to understand it or figure out what is good and what is bad. And then there is the increasing violence and terrorism and bullying and anxiety and anger. It all seems to be growing exponentially.

Fear has such power. The thing about terrorists and bullies and the media is that they know this. They exploit our fears.

I heard a clear description on the radio the other day of what ISIS wanted to accomplish in Paris. They want fear of Muslims to grow around the world so that the Muslims will experience the backlash of being isolated, excluded, and persecuted and then will be more likely to sympathize with and join extremist movements.

And unfortunately, it’s working. There has been a backlash of fear and exclusion around the world and particularly in our country. They play on fear in order to cause people to exclude and to go against their basic principles.

But welcome and standing together in solidarity as people of principle and of faith, Jewish, Muslim, Christian, other, against all who would act to incite fear and take life has the opposite effect. To not be afraid is often the most powerful thing that we can do.

The angels’ message is one we desperately need to hear today, personally and communally.

Where do you need to hear these words for your life today?

We see this courage lived out in Jesus. He was never afraid to cross religious and social boundaries in order to welcome the sinner, the outcast, the enemy. He was not afraid to speak up, to stand up against the loudest voices in Rome and in the Temple establishment. He was not afraid to show that there was a different way other than power, exclusion, and fearmongering.

He was the living reality of the verse that reminds us that “Perfect love casts out all fear.”

Jesus embodied that perfect love of God and fills us with that gift as we trust in his grace and walk in his ways.

He must have been nurtured in these qualities our courageous love by his mother, Mary. Her example of courage can give us tools to follow the angel’s instructions to not be afraid.

There seems to be nothing special about Mary’s circumstances. She was ordinary. There is nothing in her circumstances that would have indicated that she would play this crucial role in God’s plan.

To Mary in her ordinary moments, to us in our daily worries, we hear these words that give us courage: “Greetings favored one.” You are favored by God, not because you are special or because life is perfect or will be perfect. You are favored because God is with you. God loves you and has a special plan and purpose for you.

We resist this idea. We’re too ordinary, too scared. We can’t see how it is possible.

But the angel continues: “God will send a Savior for the world, Jesus. He will be like David but his Kingdom will never end.”

We are invited to be a part of it, to take that step of courage and live into it, this Kingdom that is a place of love and justice for all people. It is not a Kingdom of fear or exclusion or violence, but of God’s love. We are invited to live into that Kingdom.

But is it really possible? Gabriel, you must have missed the news this week, this year, this century.

The Holy Spirit is still moving and working—even today. Mary was no more capable of answering the problems of her time than we are today. But God was, and is. By the power of the Holy Spirit, nothing is impossible with God.

So the only question left then is how we will answer. Will we say, thanks, but I’d prefer to put my trust in violence, protection, fear, exclusion. Or, will we be like Mary and trust the words of the angel, following the instructions to ‘not be afraid,’ to trust that nothing is impossible with God.

May we trust God, may we live out the words of the angel and the example of Mary. May we live with faith and courage, giving up fear, giving ourselves in the love of God so that we might, like Mary, be those who bear God’s love in our world, living witnesses to the fact that “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.”