

Fear Not

A Sermon for Worship on Christmas Eve
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
December 24, 2016
Texts: Luke 2:1-20

Luke's version of the story of Jesus' birth is one so familiar that we scarcely hear it any more when it's read as a part of Christmas worship. We hear the words "in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus" and our brains just sort of zone out, thinking back to Christmases past and the other moments we've encountered those words. This is to be expected when a story becomes ingrained into our lives like this one has. It just happens and that's fine. After all, memories of Christmases past are part and parcel of Christmas.

We all have those Christmas traditions that we observe, you should forgive the expression, "religiously." These can be anything – from which ornament goes on the tree first to which cookies have to be baked or it's just not Christmas. Sometimes these Christmas traditions become almost tyrannical, setting us up for disappointment as we set our expectations for Christmas impossibly high. The presents will be wrapped to perfection and artistically placed around the perfect tree which has just the right number of lights on it. Christmas cards will be sent out to far flung friends and family, each containing a personal letter. The celebratory Christmas meal will also be perfection itself, just the

right balance of savory and sweet, comprised of foods everyone likes. Everyone loves all their gifts and everything fits. This is our Christmas dream each year. Yeah right.

No such luck at my house anyway. Clarence, the clearance Christmas tree, already has a string of lights burned out, buried amongst the decorations ensuring they are there for the duration. Hey, the dark spot on the tree isn't *that* noticeable... The Christmas cards were mailed by this past Monday, except I immediately started realizing I had inadvertently left people off the list. Again. Shopping was done early for once, but I realized yesterday I bought wrong sizes on a few things. Heck. We needed something to do next week, right? And Christmas dinner? Well, that *should* be delicious. But, honestly, we can only hope. Any of this sounding familiar????

Dear friends, this is *not* Christmas, in spite of what our stuff crazed society wants to tell us over and over and over again. Christmas is not and was never about the perfect tree, or the perfect gift or the perfect meal. Christmas is about miracles and wonder and new beginnings and emerging possibilities unimagined suddenly becoming real. Christmas is about a tiny baby born in a barn to a frightened young girl and the man who stood by her even though the baby wasn't his. Christmas is about angels paving the way over and over again that this impossible birth, this incredible child might be born so that a new way of

living in relationship with God and each other might emerge. Christmas, dear friends, is about miracles and it always has been.

Now we hear the word miracle, and alarm bells go off in our heads. Miracles! Not now anyway. That doesn't happen anymore, if it ever did. Miracles – that's kid's stuff, like the tooth fairy and Harry Potter. Miracles are just things we don't have an explanation for yet. That's all. Really? Well, I think Lula Mae Hardaway¹ would disagree.

Lula Mae was born in the 1920's to a teenage mother in the South who soon abandoned her to one abusive relative after another. Somehow she survived and made her way north where she married a man 30 years older who soon forced her into prostitution because their growing family needed money. Lula Mae decided this was unacceptable so she fled her husband, taking her young children with her to Detroit where she found work as a maid and took her children to church every Sunday. She was especially protective of her third son, Steveland, who was blind but very gifted musically. Steveland taught himself to sing and to play a variety of musical instruments, always with his mother's gentle encouragement. Steveland performed regularly at church and soon became a sensation in the neighborhood. One day, when he was 11, a Motown executive who heard him perform gave him an album contract and new name – Little Stevie

¹ Jennifer Brownell, "Jesus Wonder," Still Speaking Daily Devotional, United Church of Christ, Dec, 22, 2016.

Wonder. Great story, right? A mother's love and determination propels her son into the stratosphere. But there's more to this story. Lula Mae is actually credited with co-writing several of Stevie Wonder's biggest hits including *Signed, Sealed, Delivered* and *I Was Made to Love Her*.

Miracles abound in this story! That Lula Mae survived her horrendous childhood is certainly one. That she escaped an abusive husband and was able to build an independent life for herself and her children as a black woman in the 1950's is another. Her faith in her disabled child, so unusual in this time period, is yet another. The happenstance encounter of her gifted son and a Motown executive is still another. And what do all these miraculous encounters have in common? One thing – Lula Mae never gave in to her fear. She triumphed over it, building upon it to save herself and to nurture her family, a family which would produce a musician known around the world. Lula Mae did not let her fear hold her back. She did not let it hold her son back either. Lula Mae grew beyond her fear and, dear friends, I would argue that this is the message of the Christmas story we need to hear this year.

“Do not be afraid,” or “fear not” in the King James version of the Bible, are part and parcel of Christmas. The angel who appears to Mary to tell her she is to give birth to this miraculous child says as its first words to her, “Fear not.” God has chosen you

for this task and you can handle it. Mary agrees. The angel appears again to Joseph, in Matthew's Gospel version of the nativity story, saying "fear not." Take Mary as your wife anyway in spite of your concerns that the child she carries is not yours. This is all God's plan. And Joseph agrees. Time passes and the unlikely couple and parents to be find themselves on the road to Bethlehem, Mary ready to give birth at any moment. Still they trudge on, "fear not" no doubt ringing in their ears with every step. Finally they reach their destination only to find themselves in the only housing available – a stable filled with animals. Not a very sanitary place for a baby to be born, but it was warm and dry. And, again, "fear not" carries them through the moment of the birth and the tiny newborn is swaddled and laid in a trough usually used to feed the animals.

On a hillside outside the city, the angels are busy once again, this time appearing to a group of shepherds tending their flocks on the hillsides where they lived with the sheep. Let's pause here for just a minute to note that the text clearly states the fields are where they *lived*. They didn't have homes in town, taking turns with the sheep. They lived with the sheep in the fields, making them literally at the very outermost edges of the society of which they were part. They were the most marginal of all the people in town and it is to them, to the lowest of the low, that the angels

appeared to share the good news that the Messiah had been born. And what do the angels say first? Say it with me now – “fear not!” I know it’s pretty scary to see us, a bunch of angels, suddenly appear but don’t be afraid. We’re here because God wanted you to know first that a Savior, your Savior, has been born. And we want you to go and see this miracle for yourself. So, the shepherds, undoubtedly confused and probably still afraid, do as the angels tell them and there he is. The tiny baby just as the angels promised. Now their fear was gone, replaced by hope realized and new possibilities emerging. So they took off to share their news. And that’s where this part of the Christmas story ends, at least on the bible’s printed page.

But it doesn’t really end there. We know that. This story lives on and on in the minds and hearts of everyone who hears it, including us. And, if we let it, our lives can be forever transformed by it. Whoa! Wait a minute, we think. I don’t want my life changed. I like it just fine, thank you very much. Change is scary. Change means I can lose control. I like control. A lot. As do we all. Only problem is, the angels’ message is not “change not.” The angels’ message, repeated over and over again, is “fear not.” Fear not, the angels said to Noah and Abraham and Sarah. Fear not, the angels said to Joseph and Moses and David. Fear not God said through the words of the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Fear not, God and the angels say to us, all the time.

Dear friends, in our fragile, frightened and frightening world, God says to us again tonight, and every night and every day, fear not. But, make no mistake, God also says more. In every single “fear not” story in the Bible, something else always happens. The angels give another instruction. Do something. Fear not, God says. Things will be okay and they’ll be okay because I need you to do something to help make it okay. Fear not, Noah. It’s gonna rain but build an ark. Fear not, Abraham, just go where I tell you and I’ll keep my promise that you will become the father of many nations. Fear not, Moses, I’ll help you set my people free. Fear not, Mary. This baby you will bring into the world will change it forever. Fear not ... then do something.

So, dear friends, on this night when we recall how one poor, refugee couple’s courageous action changed the world through a child born, I urge you to remember that the angels’ message of “fear not” was never intended only as words of comfort. Instead, these words were always intended as a call to action. Fear not ... and do something. All we have to do is figure out just what exactly God is asking us to do as we let go of our fear and move into God’s future. Fear not whatever has you anxious and worried. Fear not the future, yours or the world’s. Fear not that problems are insurmountable. Fear not, God says. I’m here. You are not alone. Let’s do something together to make things better. What might that be? I wonder.... Amen.