

HAVE NO FEAR

A Christmas Eve Sermon on Luke 2—Rev. Adam E. Eckhart
December 24, 2016—First United Church of Christ (Congregational), Milford, CT

Here's two things that have consistently frightened my young children over the years: monsters and beards. Monsters makes sense—monsters have special powers and lurk in the darkness, so checking closets and under the bed is a regular pastime for many parents. Beards I think are relatively less scary than monsters but are visible, so they can't be avoided. My own children have had to confront the beard fear as they grow: they're two for two in bearded grandfathers. "Don't be scared," I have told my kids, "Granddad's beard is just hair. Nothing to be afraid of." But fear doesn't like to sit down and think things through. Eventually the kids see past the beard and appreciate the love of their grandfathers, so that they can give a high five or even a hug once in a while. But it takes work. I suppose then it's no wonder that Santa Claus is appreciated by most kids not for his beard, nor for his supernatural ability to know when they are sleeping and when they're awake, nor of invading their homes at night, but instead for bringing gifts. Without the gifts, Santa's just a bearded monster.

As far as I know, angels don't have beards, but regardless we know that when they appear in the Bible, they scare people. Most every time an angel shows up in the Bible, the first thing out of the angel's mouth is "Don't be afraid." These words were countering a human's natural first reaction, the reflex to the angel's appearance, which was to be afraid, to be very afraid. Popular imagination depicts angels as humanoid, with a head, two arms and two legs, big white wings, and pretty voices, sweetly singing o'er the plains. Cherubs, for instance, spring to mind, fluttering around with lyres. Their appearance even with beautiful features would have still frightened people because of their supernatural nature, hovering, bringing messages from God. But there are also traditions that say that angels are not always humanoid, that they have six wings and eyes all over their freakish bodies, a divine being but monstrous.

And their voice, well their voices for all we know may have been less delightful and more intended to cut through the background noise to make their words clear to all who are supposed to hear. I imagine that it would be a harder sell to convince little girls to portray angels in Christmas pageants if they were told they're supposed to be as scary and as monstrous as possible. 'Lose the halos, here's extra eyes to glue onto your costume. Maybe put some vampire teeth in; any of you want to wear a

fake beard?’ Angels may in some cases have been intimidating, perhaps even grotesque to human eyes and ears. In that case, “Don’t be afraid” takes on another magnitude of meaning. “Don’t be afraid of my presence and my appearance! Look past that—I’ve got something special to tell you!”

I actually prefer to think of the angels as scary looking, as grotesque, because it reinforces a major dimension of the Christmas story. Through the birth of Christ and the sharing of the news of Christ’s birth, God grants beauty to a fearful and scary world.

Christians sometimes exaggerate the level to which the Old Testament portrays God as uncaring and distant. Instead, the Hebrew Bible does portray God walking with Adam and Eve, appearing to Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and Moses, and caring deeply for the Hebrew people through all their faults and misdeeds. But by the first century A.D., the Hebrews as far as we can tell felt that God had been less present in their community. Fewer sacred writings seemed to be popping up, the Roman occupation and their oppressive treatment was trampling the Hebrew’s souls. Hope was replaced with fear and doubt.

It is into this situation that Jesus enters. God ushers in Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us, a vulnerable baby, a cute little baby—pre-beard Jesus—to mark God’s unconditional commitment to humankind. Through Christ’s birth, God says, “Look, you mean so much to me that I am sharing with you my Son, not to spy on you and tell me if you’ve been bad or good but to deliver goodness and mercy, hope and justice, righteousness and perseverance as gifts of love to all people.” Without Jesus, God may seem to some like the divine bearded monster. But with Jesus, God transforms ugliness and fear into the occasion for God’s beautiful favor.

Notice how the gift of Jesus transforms everybody around him. Mary’s scary situation is transformed by the good news of Jesus Christ. Mary looks like a unwed teenage mother in a community where such things could get you killed. Scary situation, and the potential for ugly disapproval among the people. But the gift of Jesus means that Mary instead is chosen to live according to God’s word, to face the fear of her situation with faith, to be revered by millions as the mother of God, full of grace, beautiful beyond physical appearance.

The angels themselves are therefore bestowed a level of beauty by the message they are blessed to deliver. I bring you good news of great joy! Look at me, past whatever I look like, forget about me, hear instead that the most beautiful gift has been shared and you can see for yourselves

that today a savior has been born. Just in town. Take a break from your work. Drop your staffs, go into town, and I promise you, once you see this Jesus for yourself, everything will change. This Hebrew shepherd's life that you may have thought was hopeless now is filled with hope, for God is truly with us! I can even hear the angels saying to each other, "Can you believe that because of this message we share with tonight, thousands of years from now little girls and boys will want to portray us in Christmas pageants?"

We who hear and witness the Christmas story played out in pageants, in lessons and carols, we too are drawn into God's dream where ugliness and fear are transformed into beauty. Jesus teaches us to turn the other cheek, to love God and our neighbor as ourselves, love our enemies, forgive, stand in solidarity with the vulnerable and help those in greatest need. These are loving acts that bring beauty into our world, people becoming gifts of love and peace to each other.

A few days ago, Shane Claiborne tweeted a picture of a Christmas ornament, which had originally been a tear gas canister. Re-purposed for Christmas tree use, an object of conflict among people was transformed into a symbol of beautiful peace. That's Christmas love transformation!

Living out God's unconditional and transforming love is our way of echoing the joyous strains of the angels, our way of resonating with the beauty of the nativity scene, of continuing God's tradition of the Word becoming flesh. When we minister in Christ's loving name, we are the Word becoming beautiful flesh today. No matter who we are, no matter where we are in life's journey, no matter what we look like or how much fear we have faced or run away from in the past, God's love draws close to us and transforms us in beauty. We are beautiful not by anything we have done but simply because God sweeps us up into the beautiful story of God's salvation.

Through the angels, God takes something scary, and uses it as a vehicle for something beautiful. Through Jesus, God enters into the often scary history of humankind and transforms it into the stage for God's beautiful love. Through our lives, God's Word and Spirit inhabit life today and grant us beauty together that we are incapable of finding by ourselves.

God is with us: Have no fear! Instead, have yourselves a merry and joyous Christmas and a beautiful New Year in the light of God's gift of love through Jesus Christ. Amen.