

**Do Not Be Afraid To Love**  
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**Seattle First Baptist Church**  
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The words “do not be afraid” occur over 300 times in the Bible. For those who like some Biblical humor, maybe it’s because these words are usually said by angels, and the cherubim and seraphim we meet in the Bible look more like the flying purple people-eater than the pink-cheeked cherubs on the Sistine Chapel ceiling. I’ve never encountered an other-worldly angel, but I can certainly understand how the words “do not be afraid” would be quite an understatement when confronted with one. But I think there’s more to this common phrase, particularly in our Advent stories, when we are getting ready to come close to the mystery of Christmas, as the Godly Play Sunday school tells it. I think “do not be afraid” is not only said for comfort, but is also an expression of love. After all, 1 John 4:18 says “perfect love casts out fear.”

Over the last month since the election, I’ve had iterations of the same conversation with probably a dozen people. Folks are expressing that they finally feel like they can let their shoulders drop, or let out a breath that they’d been holding for...say, the past 9 months, or, the past 4 years. But there’s some caution there, too. There’s an anxiety there, a worry that taking a full breath or letting the tiniest bit of hope into your world again will jinx something, that feeling that “thrill of hope” is too good to be true. As we look towards COVID-19 vaccines, as well as remember all the diseases that have yet to be eliminated, we confess fear of how the roll-out of the vaccine will go. Is it going to be enough? Is it ok to feel the hope skipping in my heart?

Beloveds, being afraid to feel joy is a trauma response. I want to acknowledge that each of us worshipping together today have our own assortments of traumas that we store in our bodies and in our hearts, and I encourage you to seek whatever support you need in processing your own life situations and experiences. Far too many Christian ministers have attempted to “pray away” the pain or anxiety or fear, and I want to be clear that is not what I am doing here. Your experiences are real and your feelings are valid.

So, today, knowing the worry I face in my own heart as I try to embrace positivity in this season of expectant waiting, I say to you, “do not be afraid” to let love in on this third Sunday in Advent. “Do not be afraid” are words of comfort. So, too, are the words of our Scripture today, from the prophet Isaiah in chapter 61:

The Lord God’s spirit is upon me,  
because the Lord has anointed me.  
He has sent me  
to bring good news to the poor,  
to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim release for captives,  
and liberation for prisoners,

2

to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor  
and a day of vindication for our God,  
to comfort all who mourn,

3

to provide for Zion's mourners,  
to give them a crown in place of ashes,  
oil of joy in place of mourning,  
a mantle of praise in place of discouragement.

They will be called Oaks of Righteousness,  
planted by the Lord to glorify himself.

4

They will rebuild the ancient ruins;  
they will restore formerly deserted places;  
they will renew ruined cities,  
places deserted in generations past.

The prophet Isaiah, or, as we heard a few weeks ago in Godly Play, the multiple prophets whose writings have been compiled in the Isaiah text, prophesied hundreds of years before Jesus read these words from the scroll in the temple in Nazareth, at the beginning of his ministry. Pastor Sam reminded us on the first Sunday of Advent that there was a huge time gap before Jesus showed up on the scene, born under a special star to an unmarried teenage mother from a rural village. Generations had come and gone, hearing the words of Isaiah over and over and over again, wondering when this messiah, this "anointed one," this special messenger from God, would come. The expectant waiting during this gap of hundreds of years, time in which surely God was speaking to God's people but which we don't have written record of, the anticipatory desire must have been too much! Because Isaiah wasn't talking about what would come at the end of days, in the time of God's judgement, at the apocalyptic revelation of the Divine recorded in scrolls like Daniel. Isaiah was talking in the here-and-now, naming the changes that would occur in folks' real, present lives. Isaiah's prophecy reveals what kind of love ushers in the kingdom (or, as we have been saying, kin-dom) of God.

This kind of love, this kin-dom love, is good news, healing, liberty, release, comfort. This love that "proclaims the year of the Lord's favor" draws on the principle of the jubilee year, the year when debts are wiped away, prisoners are freed, fields allowed to rest and the land is returned to the original owners, as told in Leviticus 25 and Deuteronomy 15. This is not love that can be found in "some heaven lightyears away," as the hymn says, but love that has real significance for the daily lives of humans, people like you and like me. This kind of gospel love, tending and mending love, liberty-proclaiming and jubilee-ushering love has the power to cast out fear. Because this love is justice-centered love, the love that calls us to be active right where we are, wherever we are, to share this good news with all Creation. I can almost hear the angels singing, "fear not" because the God of Isaiah, the God of Jubilee, *this* God loves *you*. Do not be afraid, beloveds.

But let's be real: there's a lot of fear going around right now. I wonder if this world will ever recover from the fear of each other during this pandemic, the fear of what virus our breath can spread, the fear that causes many to avert their eyes when passing people on the sidewalk nowadays. Yes, there are individual fears but there are also fears on a systemic level. There's

fear of retaliation from groups upset about the results of elections. There's fear of traveling, fear of missing out on so many life-defining events. And today, right here in our city, there's fear of being targets for violence based on your skin color, your gender identity and expression, your sexuality. So let us wonder: what kind of love casts out systemic fear?

It's no wonder to me that when Jesus was trying to explain his mission to the temple in his hometown, recorded in Luke 4, he looked to the Isaiah scroll. He looked to the words that connected the heavenly with the earthly, the godly with the stuff of flesh, that showed plainly God's commitment to the poor and oppressed, to the lowly and the marginalized. These words represented Jesus' mission as Emmanuel, "God with us": to proclaim good news to individuals but also to the powers and principalities of this world that caused individuals to need good news. The prophet's words, expressing the extravagant love of God, also represent our mission as people of faith in the world today. Scott Bader-Saye writes in the Feasting on the Word commentary: "Mission is not primarily something that goes out from God's people--by sending money or sending missionaries--but something that defines God's people, as existing for the sake of the oppressed, brokenhearted, imprisoned and mournful...Being missional, in light of this passage, means profoundly challenging all forms of cultural Christianity that would make 'church' an end in itself, a community of the saved devoted to maintaining a building, a set of programs, and a fellowship of the like-minded..." We are called to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves with this love that casts out fear, this is bold, prophetic, creative, gut-rending love. We are called to live this love every day, wherever we are, with whatever we have to offer.

If we have lived at all in this world, we know that it's not always easy or simple or straightforward to love. Perhaps you're thinking that you don't have enough stored up in your cup to pour out to others right now. Or that you aren't sure what kind of actions you are called to do in love. That's ok. The love that ushers in the kin-dom of God can be complicated, messy, and also profound in its simplicity. It is kneeling at the bedside of your dying grandmother, shoveling the walk of an elderly neighbor, crying over your best friend's new baby, holding hands until the very last moment before your loved one goes into surgery. It is telling the hard truth, making sacrifices, even letting go. Love is refusing to let someone define you, refusing to believe lies told about people with your identity, and continuing to be your own beautiful created-by-the-Holy-self. Love is the essential workers continuing to put food on grocery store shelves and wipe the brows of people on ventilators and distribute personal protective equipment and sweep the floors of hospitals. It is advocating living wages for essential workers. Love is wearing masks in the midst of a global pandemic and staying home though it's been months since we've hugged someone outside our household so that we can make the load a little lighter for our healthcare providers. Love is refusing to tolerate "acceptable death tolls," and calling into account the government leaders that have mismanaged this public health crisis. Love is trying to make one person's life a little better today, as well as committing to work for the long haul to tear down systems of oppression and rebuild the world closer to the kin-dom of God. Again, Scott Bader-Saye: "To be missional is to live as a people of good news, liberation, justice, and comfort in such a way that the world may take notice and be drawn to the ways of God."

Johann Christoph Arnold, a Christian writer out of the Anabaptist tradition, writes in my favorite Advent devotional,

"Love is a tangible reality. Sometimes it is born of passion or devotion; sometimes it demands hard work and sacrifice. Its source is unimportant. But when we live for love,

we will be able to meet any challenge that comes our way--even the final one, of death. As my great aunt Else lay dying of tuberculosis, a friend asked her if she had one last wish. She replied, "Only to love more." If we live our lives in love, we will know peace now, and at the hour of death. And we will not be afraid."

"Only to love more." The only regret, at the time of her death, was that she wished she could love more.

Beloved church, how will you love more in this season? How will you cast out fear, for yourself or for others? Know that whatever you do is enough, if done with love for the radical and redemptive God that proclaims good news, healing, rest, release, liberty and comfort.

**Benediction:**

May God Bless you and keep you.

May God's face shine upon you and be gracious unto you.

May God give you grace not to sell yourselves short,

Grace to risk something big for something good,

Grace to remember that the world is now too dangerous for anything but truth, and too small for anything but love.

May God take your minds and think through them.

May God take your lips and speak through them.

May God take your hands and work through them.

May God take your hearts and set them on fire.