

Surely I am with you always

Steve Bell

As a young boy already, I noticed that often in the Bible, whenever an angel appeared to a person and said, “Do not be afraid,” the person was likely to soon encounter terrifying or heartbreaking things. And I secretly harboured the thought that if angels were to be more truthful, they should rather say, “Be afraid; be very, very afraid.”

Jesus too, I noticed, told his disciples more than once to not be afraid. And many of them went on to die violently, having suffered terrible hardships,



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rejection, and aloneness—the very things that reasonable people are reasonably afraid of.

The angel Gabriel’s encounter with Mary (Luke 26–38) is one particularly dramatic example of my childhood misgivings about scriptural consolations. God’s mighty angel startles the young girl with the news that she is to become the ark of the new covenant—that she is

to receive the seed of God, to harbour it in her womb, and to bear it forth for the sake of the world. It is a scene that is often serenely portrayed in art with delicate, radiant light and concordant colours. The English poet Malcolm Guite wrote a most astonishingly wonderful sonnet about the encounter, “Annunciation,” in his collection *Sounding the Seasons*:

*We see so little, stayed on surfaces,
We calculate the outsides of all things,
Preoccupied with our own purposes
We miss the shimmer of the angel’s wings,
They coruscate around us in their joy
A swirl of wheels and eyes and wings unfurled,
They guard the good we purpose to destroy,
A hidden blaze of glory in God’s world.
But on this day a young girl stopped to see
With open eyes and heart. She heard the voice;
The promise of His glory yet to be,*

*As time stood still for her to make a choice;
Gabriel knelt and not a feather stirred,
The Word himself was waiting on her word.*¹

With those last two lines, the poet marvellously captures a pregnant and breathless moment where a broken cosmos awaits news of the beginning of its glorious recreation.

Such moments deserve great poems. However, something in me objects that unless more words were spoken than recorded, the young girl was not warned that this recreating would come at the cost of her son's life on a cruel instrument of state torture. The elder priest Simeon at least had the decency to warn her when, after rhapsodizing on the glorious salvation to come through this child, he lowered his eyes to Mary and told her that even so, a sword would

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pierce her heart (Luke 2:21–35).

Be not afraid, indeed.

If *Be not afraid* is not a promise of exemption from frightening things, then what can it mean? I suspect the problem arises from our Western habit of lifting sacred texts from their context and then asking them to speak on their own. I've only recently noticed that, more often than not, when the words *Be not afraid* are spoken, the words *I will be with you* aren't far off. And although they aren't present in Gabriel's encounter with Mary, one of the ancient prophetic names for the child she was to bear was Emmanuel, or God *with Us*.

And here a personal story comes to mind.

Once, when my daughter Sarah was the tender age of five or so years, I was in charge of taking care of her through an evening while my wife was out. I was careful to put her to bed at the usual time of 7:30, not because I was typically careful of such things but because my favorite television show (reruns of *Kojak*) was on at 8:00. So we accomplished the bedtime ritual efficiently, and I kissed her good night and went happily into the TV room across the hallway to await the show to start.

¹ Malcolm Guite, "Annunciation," in *Sounding the Seasons: Seventy Sonnets for the Christian Year* (Norwich, UK: Canterbury Press, 2012).

It was only fifteen minutes or so into the episode when I heard Sarah crying. I quickly dashed across the hall to see what was causing her tears and discovered that she was terribly afraid—of the dark, of robbers, of whatever childhood terror one might imagine. We talked for a while about the unlikelihood of anyone breaking in, and how, even if it did happen, I was right across the hallway and would be able to protect her.



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We negotiated keeping the hall light on and the doors open so she could hear me and I her. I reassured her of her safety and with a kiss returned to my show.

Twenty minutes later saw a repeat of the same thing. This time the crying was louder, and it was harder to calm her down. But I managed to do so and again returned to my show.

Then, just as my show was coming to a dramatic climax, the wailing started up again, more intensely than the first two times. Frustrated and just a little desperate to not miss the show’s ending, I said possibly the most shameful thing I’ve said to any of my children: “Sarah! Honey! Jesus loves you and nothing bad is going to happen.”

She turned her anxious, tear-smearing face to mine and softly asked, “Does that mean he doesn’t love the children that *do* get hurt?”

In John’s first epistle, he makes the claim that “perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18). And love, Christianly understood anyway, is the giving of the self for the flourishing of the other. So I finally did what I should have done in the first place. I turned off the TV and crawled in beside my beloved daughter and held her until she fell asleep.

Are you afraid?

I am.

I am afraid of many, many things. Some of them are quite likely to come to pass. I’m afraid of economic hardship. I’m afraid of climate change. I’m afraid of Trumpism and social collapse. I’m afraid of terrorism and terrorists—those who don’t covet my stuff but do covet my terror. I’m afraid of physical pain and humiliation while I am watching my par-

ents suffer the ravages of old age. I'm afraid of disease and loss. I'm afraid I haven't loved sufficiently. I could go on.

And so, I pray. But I no longer pray as I used to—that God will exempt me and my beloved from the many unwelcomed things that are surely go-

I pray in order to get to that place deep inside me, that place that is unfractured by anxieties, that is seamless and serene, that is calm and collected—that place where I know in my marrow that God is Emmanuel: with me, and I with him. There, and only there, I am unafraid and at rest.

ing to come to pass. I pray in order to get to that place deep inside me, that place that is unfractured by anxieties, that is seamless and serene, that is calm and collected—that place where I know in my marrow that God is Emmanuel: with me, and I with him. There, and only there, I am unafraid and at rest. The more I can manage to find myself there, the more I can live in a broken world as Christ did—in shalomic solidarity with all of creation until all of creation is restored to its intended glory.

I am writing this while visiting my daughter and her family. This morning I asked Sarah for a Bible so I could look up a passage or two that I wanted to refer to. The Bible she brought me was one

she's had from since her youth. I read several passages, including the exchange between Gabriel and Mary and the Song of Simeon, both found in the first chapters of Luke's Gospel. I suddenly remembered Jesus's last words to his disciples before ascending to the right hand of God. I found them at the very end of Matthew's Gospel. And tears came as I read the words she underlined many years ago: "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (28:20).

Fear not, indeed.

About the author

Steve Bell is an award-winning singer, songwriter, and author who lives with his wife, Nanci, in Winnipeg, Treaty 1 Territory and home of the Red River Métis Nation.