

# Be Not Afraid

a sermon by the Rev. Mark Worth

## READINGS:

1. From Geshe Kelsang Gyatso at [dealingwithfear.org](http://dealingwithfear.org)

According to Buddhism, there is unhealthy fear and healthy fear. For example, when we are afraid of something that cannot actually harm us – such as spiders – or something we can do nothing to avoid – such as old age or being struck down by smallpox or being run over by a truck – then our fear is unhealthy. On the other hand, when someone gives up smoking because they are afraid of developing lung cancer, this is a healthy fear because the danger is real and there are constructive steps they can take to avoid it.

2. From Julian of Norwich, Showing of Love, circa 1393

All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.

## THE SERMON

“Be not afraid.” Whenever an angel appears anywhere in the New Testament, whether telling Mary she will have an unusual pregnancy, proclaiming the birth of Jesus to dumbfounded shepherds, or saying that Jesus is not in the tomb, the first words spoken by the angel are almost certain to be “Fear not,” “Do not be alarmed,” or some other version of “Be not afraid.”

Why? Well, biblical angels aren’t very comforting – they’re scary. Despite our popular images, they don’t look like beautiful women or cute babies. Biblical angels are always male, and are sometimes described as having multiple eyes and multiple faces. Put that on a Hallmark card! And despite what the hymns say, angels don’t seem to sing, but they do shout a lot. And yes, while they often bring good news, their news (such as, “You’re going to have an unplanned pregnancy,” or, “the body of Jesus isn’t here,”) generally only sounds good in hindsight.

Be not afraid! There is plenty to be afraid of in this world. You’ve probably heard the news – we finally seem to be pulling out of the Great Recession. In 2008 the global financial system experienced its worst crisis since the 1930s. Stock markets went into cardiac arrest and fell by more than 50 percent from 2007 levels. Lehman Brothers collapsed, and other financial institutions needed bailouts. For a while, our church endowment lost two fifths of its value. And although the stock market, GM, Chrysler, retail sales, the housing market, and the construction trades all appear to be making a recovery, many of us still feel more than a little shaky about the hole we’re starting to crawl out of.

And while the financial news is improving, there are plenty of other things to worry about. We’re still at war in Afghanistan. There is continuing saber-rattling from North Korea. There’s a mess in Mali, unrest in Pakistan, civil war in Syria, and Iran is probably developing a nuclear weapon.

And there are the events of our own lives – job insecurities, new challenges at work, new regulations, new technologies, financial worries, relationship difficulties, the aging process, illnesses that we currently have, and illnesses that we may contract.

### **Something to worry about ~**

Not worried yet? Mark Mihal, a 43-year-old golfer, got an unexpected hole-in-one. That is, he went into the hole himself! A sinkhole opened up on the golf course last Tuesday (March 12, 2013) and swallowed him! One moment he was on the golf course in Waterloo, Illinois, and the next moment he was in an 18-foot sinkhole with a dislocated shoulder. And it’s only been a couple of weeks (March 1) since a sinkhole swallowed Jeffrey Bush, a 36-year-old Florida man who was asleep in his bed. He is still missing and is presumed dead.

Still not worried? According to the Boston Sunday Globe (Nov. 26, 1995), “airplanes periodically shed objects such as aluminum skins, access panels, fuselage doors, hot turbine blades,

frozen sewage, cowlings, engine cones and even whole engines.” Imagine getting hit with frozen airplane sewage that has been hurtling toward earth at hundreds of miles per hour!

There’s more! How about killer bees? The Boston Globe reported (on March 12, 1992) that Africanized bees are moving north from South America. They are descended from twenty-six Africanized queen bees that were accidentally released in Brazil in 1957. They are more aggressive than the European bees they are replacing; they swarm more, and pursue intruders farther. In 1978 Africanized bees killed 100 people in Venezuela, and they killed a hiker in Costa Rica in 1986. His body was found with 8,000 stings.

And if that’s not enough, according to an article by astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson in the Bangor Daily News of April 13, 2009, “thousands of asteroids the size of baseball stadiums – and larger” have the potential to collide with the Earth “at impact speeds of at least 7 miles per second.” The smallest of them would be enough to cause deadly tsunamis, and the largest among them are the size of mountains – and could extinguish half of all living things on Earth.

Still worse, the New York Times has reported (Oct. 22, 1997) that our galaxy, the Milky Way, is approaching the Andromeda galaxy at the speed of 300,000 miles per hour. It is quite possible that the two galaxies will collide head-on with one another in a mere five billion years.

### **Unhealthy and healthy fears ~**

And yet our better angels say, “Be not afraid.” Let go of your fear.

Buddhism teaches that there are healthy fears and unhealthy fears. If we fear a collision with another galaxy, this is an unhealthy fear because it is such a remote possibility, and we can’t do anything about it anyway. But if we smoke cigarettes and fear the health problems that smoking may cause, this can be a healthy fear because it will help us to stop smoking and avoid lung cancer, heart disease and emphysema.

On the other hand, we all age. We all will be sick at some time in our lives. We all will die. We cannot avoid these things, and yet people fear such things. So we need to understand which fears are healthy fears, and which are unhealthy fears.

After the Buddha realized that suffering is an unavoidable part of life, he knew that the way to end suffering was to find out what caused it. Just as a doctor needs to diagnose the illness before she can treat it, we need to know what causes our fears and anxieties if we are to overcome them. Why do we suffer? Why are we anxious? Why do we fear? By observing people the Buddha discovered that the causes of suffering are craving and desire, and ignorance.

The fact that all people suffer is the first of the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism. That suffering has a cause, and that the cause is desire or craving – and our ignorance of the causes of our suffering – is the Second Noble Truth.

What do we desire? Favorite foods, entertainment, vacations, new gadgets, popularity, money, sex, beauty, to stay young forever, and so many other things. Even if we have these things, we want more. Our desires are never satisfied. And so Buddhism teaches us to recognize what this is all about, and let go of our desires and cravings.

The Buddha taught that craving has its roots in ignorance. Ignorance, in Buddhism, is different than simply being uneducated. It is the inability to see things as they really are. As long as people remain ignorant of the reality of how the world works – such as impermanence, and the inevitability of change – they will suffer from all kinds of misunderstandings. But by study, careful thought and meditation, we come to see the world differently.

In my lifetime I will eventually lose everything – my youth, my career, my health, loved ones, my life itself. This is not pessimism; it’s realism. When we acknowledge and accept that everything in our world is temporary, that nothing is permanent, we are less fearful. But if we try to hold on to impermanent things, if we fear change and loss, we will suffer.

So you may say, “I’m afraid of losing my retirement income,” or, “I’m afraid there’s not enough

work for me in Hancock County.” Yes, those are real issues. But fear only makes it worse. We can look for solutions and make plans, but being stuck in fear will only make us miserable.

### **This was Not the Great Depression ~**

The Rev. Susan Maginn of Portland, Oregon, tells the story of a woman whose husband lost his job just before Christmas during the crash of ‘08. At that time, she spoke through tears about how difficult Christmas would be for her family.

A few months later she was interviewed again. She said things were getting more urgent at home – bills were piling up, and her husband still hadn’t found work. But when she was asked about Christmas she said that her family’s holiday had been very good. They had learned that the holiday was not about expensive gifts, but was about relationships, friendships, family.

By the time of the second interview she was accepting the situation and finding a new way. Consciously or unconsciously she had realized that many of her fears were unhealthy fears, fears of things she could not control, and so she let go of those fears.

I’m not old enough to remember the Great Depression, but my mother was frugal all of her life because of her experiences in the Depression. I know that our extended family, which included cousins, banded together to help one another during the Nineteen Thirties.

We were comfortable when I was a child in the Fifties, but my mother always thought we were poor. We had a small one-bathroom house, and one second-hand car, and we didn’t go out to eat, but we were warm and safe and comfortable and always had enough. Most importantly, as a child I knew that my parents loved me and would do everything they could to provide for me and protect me. And that’s all we really need as children, isn’t it? We don’t need to be rich.

We’ve just come through a “Great Recession.” It seemed scary, but it didn’t compare to the Great Depression. We had 25% unemployment in the year Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected – the worst month of the recent recession was 10.0%, and we’re now down to 7.7%. During the Depression, John D. Rockefeller said, “In the 93 years of my life, depressions have come and gone. Prosperity has always returned and will again.” He was right. It took time, and finally it took the massive government spending of the war years, but prosperity did return.

And so our world will always be uncertain. There are wars, diseases, and economic uncertainties. Still, the angel says, “Be not afraid.”

### **All shall be well ~**

Julian of Norwich (1342-1416) was a Christian mystic who lived in the fourteenth century. She was an anchoress, a type of hermit, in England. She lived in a cell attached to a church and dedicated her life to contemplative prayer for the community. We know little about her – even her name is uncertain, and she is called “Julian of Norwich” only because she lived at the Church of Saint Julian of Norwich.

Dame Julian is the first known woman of letters in English literature. Aware that people might not listen to her because she was a woman, she wrote, “I am a woman, ignorant, weak and frail. ... But because I am a woman, ought I therefore to believe that I should not tell you of the goodness of God?”

She lived at a time when the Black Death was sweeping the English countryside. No one understood the cause of the Plague that was so prevalent in those days. On the continent of Europe a seemingly endless war was raging – the Hundred Years War began before she was born, and continued until long after she had died.

So during her lifetime there was plenty to fear. Popular theology, the conventional wisdom, assumed that Satan was afoot, and that God was angry and was punishing people for their sins. But Julian believed that the calamities of her century were *not* punishment from God. Rather, God loved everyone and wanted to save everyone. For Dame Julian, the mystery of God’s love was a more powerful force than the reality of the hells on this earth or in some existence to come. And so her

theology leaned toward the doctrine of universal salvation. Because she expressed the hope that all will be saved, and none will be tormented in hell, she has been sometimes seen as a proto-universalist.

She taught that God's message was one of pure love for all. She understood the fears and dangers of her time, and yet she dared to say, "All shall be well." She believed in a God "who loves us and delights in us," a God who "will make all things well."

Expressing her attitude toward life, Dame Julian wrote, "all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well." Despite her fears, she remained convinced that God's reply to her prayer was, "What is impossible to you is not impossible to me. I shall preserve my word in everything, and I shall make everything well." And so, in the face of war, civil unrest, and the Black Death, Dame Julian had the unshakable faith that "All shall be well."

Whatever their message, even in situations of peril, the angels tell us, "Be not afraid." Finally, this message of hope also underlies the famous (and widely adapted) prayer of the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, "God, grant us the grace to accept with serenity the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the one from the other."

Amen.