

MAKE READY A PEOPLE #MOREHOPE
DECEMBER 1 AND 2, 2018
LUKE 1: 5-25, 57-80

It was just another day at the temple for Zacharias. It was would most likely be his once-in-a-lifetime priestly turn to make sure everything was done properly and in good order. But that already special day in the temple for Zacharias turned into something quite different when an angel showed up at the altar.

Smoke of the incense was burning symbolizing prayers going to heaven. People were praying. Zacharias was undoubtedly praying, when the angel Gabriel shows up with an important message. At the appearance of the angel, Zacharias was shocked and gripped with fear.

Angels must be startlingly awesome creatures to behold! It's easy for us to fall into the Hallmark card version of angels which often makes them the cutest thing since sliced bread. But, angels in the scriptures seemed to elicit anything but cute reactions. Their appearance "terrified" those who crossed their paths, but they also came to deliver life-altering messages.

"Do not be afraid, Zacharias; your prayer has been heard." Zacharias and Elizabeth would bear a son – incredible enough considering Elizabeth was unable to conceive and now in their old age, way past child-bearing years, they would have a child – and their son, who would be named John (not even Zacharias after his father) would prepare the

way for the one who would be the Savior of the world! He would bring great joy and happiness to his parents—and many would share in their joy. At an *old* age, that was a life-altering message.

When the angel appeared to Mary, the angel said "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus." At her *young* age, that was a life-altering message!

On the night of the Jesus' birth, when the angel appeared to the shepherds, they were "terrified" but the angel said to them: "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord." At any age, that is a life-altering message for the world!

There are lots of angels that appear in Scripture – and it seems before their message is delivered, the first words out of an angel's mouth is usually – "Do Not Be Afraid!"

Maybe because of their appearance, but I believe more likely because of what they have to say. Angels were messengers – messengers from God who would announce the life-altering words that needed to be heard at that exact moment. "Don't be afraid – don't get wrapped up in your fear – pay attention -- listen to the message I have for you right now. It's a message that will change your life and through you, change the world."

As much as I don't want us to fall into the Hallmark movie version depiction of angels – it is that time of year when we think about watching, “It's a Wonderful Life.” I can always picture poor George Bailey standing in the snow without a coat, on that bridge in Bedford Falls, thinking about ending it all. Life hadn't turned out the way George thought it would. He felt as if he was up against an impossible situation with no way out.

George was living in a state of despair with the sense that things weren't going to change for the better and nothing he could do would make any difference.

But then, Angel Second Class, Clarence Odbody shows George how different things would be had George never been born. Clarence shows George the positive influence he has had on the lives of his friends and neighbors. When George was at his lowest place of despair, Clarence gave him the life-altering message of hope he needed to hear at that very moment.

At times, we're all George Baileys. We have dreams unrealized. We're stressed by daily life. We don't fully appreciate what we have, or what we've managed to accomplish despite our obstacles. We're too often focused on the wrong things. And we're closer than we realize to a huge, catastrophic meltdown. Despair is real to anyone living in a broken world.

George Bailey reminds us that at Christmas, without question, someone, somewhere will be up against a

seemingly impossible situation with seemingly no way out. Maybe this year, it's you, or someone you love.

So, maybe you're waiting. Just waiting to hear life-altering words from someone, anyone. Advent is known as the season of waiting. One of the great truths in the story of Zachariah and Elizabeth was that despite what they likely thought, God had not given up on them and God had not forgotten about their pleas, their prayers, their hopes. It's a reminder to us that when we have to wait, God is still active and at work in our lives and in the world.

So, hear these words today, if you're faced with an impossible situation at work; or up against an impossible situation in a relationship; or burdened by an impossible situation with your family; or anxious about an impossible situation financially; or troubled by impossible situations in the world; ... listen to the words of the angels ... even though times and cultures may change, the message remains the same – “Do not be afraid ... God is going to breathe hope into the stale air of impossible situations.”

Whatever the fears might be that race through our minds at night, that sit like a solid brick in our stomachs, that clench their icy fingers around our hearts—God knows those fears. God yearns to lift them away. *Do not be afraid. There is hope.*

Hope is a powerful thing. Hope is life-altering. Hope is more than just wanting something. Hope is expecting something to happen, and having the confidence that it

will. When we hope, we don't just wait for it to happen. We get ready. We prepare. Hope moves us to action when circumstances seem bleak. It gives us courage when all around us is fear.

Do not be afraid because even in the midst of our fears, we are not alone, ever. *Do not be afraid* because even when life is turned upside down, we are in the strong company of Emmanuel, God-With-Us. *Do not be afraid* because God is an expert at taking impossible situations and turning them into blessed possibilities. *Do not be afraid* because out of impossible situations, God will do his life-altering work. *Do not be afraid* as you set out to fulfill what God is calling you to do and be.

Do not be afraid, the angels sing, because we are part of something much bigger than ourselves, because we are called to a purpose bigger than we could ever imagine, because we are here to spend our lives—however brief or long, however famous or infamous it might be—living out the kind of life-altering love God demonstrated in the birth, life, death, and resurrection—of Jesus Christ, our Immanuel.

Do not be afraid. The words of the Angels remind us that God makes us ready for whatever unknown may come our way and then calls *us* to be messengers of more hope in an ever-changing world.

Let us pray:

Dear God, as we begin this Advent season, help us to pay attention to the words of the angels. Grant us the courage to hope. To hope for your presence, to hope for your peace, To hope for your promises fulfilled. Use our lives, Lord, for your purpose as spread your life-altering message of hope to the world. Amen.

