

"The Fear Factor"

Micah 4:1-4

"...And no one shall make them afraid anymore."

When Sam was little, he would often, like so many small children, become afraid of the dark and noises that went bump in the night.

Like parents have always done in situations like that, we would climb in bed with him or as is most often the case, he with us. We would cuddle up to comfort him, and asking him what it is that is frightening him. Monsters coming through the walls, bears hiding in the closet, shadows on the walls these were the usual suspects.

Often we sing to him a song he has heard on a Veggie Tales video we used to watch together: **"God is bigger than the Boogie Man. God is bigger than Godzilla and the monsters on TV."** We laugh a little and hold each other tight, until he fell asleep.

But it is after he falls asleep that I begin to think about the many things that are scary in our world, especially now with the COVID-19 Pandemic spreading globally and here in our own part of the world, and I have to admit, I am afraid.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt once said to our nation, **"We have nothing to fear, but fear itself,"** it seems now, he was wrong.

Like many of you, I have been paying attention to the political landscape and the events unfolding in our world. It seems that the message that is being conveyed through the political ads, the candidates speeches as they stump for votes, and the conversation on the news talk shows is that we should live in a constant state of fear of this new virus and its ramifications on our global economy and our lives and livelihoods.

To borrow a line from the old movie *"The Fly"* – **"Be Afraid, Be Very Afraid!"**

Uncertainty about each day, the coming week, and our global future, of our catching the virus and spreading it, has us fearful of the unknown and each other. I don't know about you, but I am afraid. Through this new COVID-19 virus into the already global world of war and terror, and political bickering, and our fears seem justified and all the more frightening!

It can overwhelm our minds, our spirits and our relationships to the point of not just sheltering in place, but locking ourselves up in a mindset of fear that infects our human spirit to love and care for others, as we are cared for by the One whose love is a constant presence in our world and in our lives. When it all seems to get the better of me, through the constant news cycles and conversations with others, I am reminded of another vision and message that is out there.

In light of the terrifying world we seem to live in, even without this new pandemic to add to it, there is another message we need to spread, even faster than this virus. And that is God's love and healing compassion and care for one another.

The prophet **Micah** lifts up for us (as does Isaiah) – **God's vision** - of a world and a people beating their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks, and studying war no more.

While Isaiah refers to these same images, Micah adds this line: **"but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken."**

"And no one shall make them afraid!" No one!

The message that accompanies Micah's vision - consists of four words translated in the NRSV Bible – **"Do not be afraid!"**

These words are spoken **62** times throughout the scriptures by messengers of God (angels) who, in sharing them - bring a word of hope and peace to people who seem to be without hope and have much to fear.

They are words spoken to a young and frightened girl named Mary. They are words spoken to lonely shepherds on a hillside. And they are the words spoken to a grieving group of women at the empty tomb by the Risen Lord. Jesus said to them: **"Do not be afraid."**

They are not spoken naively or in a way to communicate a false sense of security and hope. Rather, they are spoken with the strong assurance – that God is ever present with us, even in the midst of things that are very terrifying – parenting, an uncertain future, bondage and oppression, violence, war, pandemics and death. **"Do not be afraid!"**

The message of this world is - **"Be Afraid!"**

But our message as those called to be God's messengers of God's Kingdom on earth is very much the opposite – **"Do not be afraid!"**

These are the words I use to whisper into Sam's ear as he slept. I am whispering them to myself. I want to whisper them, no not whisper, confidently proclaim - **"Do not be afraid!"**

They are the same words that we pray for our health care workers and those who are on the front lines of finding a way to cure this virus - **"Do not be afraid!"**

They are the words we need to say to the vulnerable, the elderly, the marginalized, and to you and your loved ones: **"Do not be afraid!"**

And they are the words that we as faith leaders, serving in interfaith places of worship are proclaiming to our people in our live-streaming, emails, texts, phone calls and social media posts: **“Do not be afraid!”**

Sure it may seem a bit too naïve when confronting the great evils of this world and the COVID-19 virus. But then again it is our message to proclaim not because there is nothing to be afraid of in the face of this global pandemic or in this world. There is much to fear. Rather, it is our message to proclaim because we live this side of the empty grave.

We are called with great conviction and resolve to boldly proclaim this message because we know like the Apostle Paul, who wrote to the early church in Rome, that nothing, not even a pandemic or economic recession can separate us from God’s love not even death! **“Do not be afraid!”**

This is our message then to take from this place and proclaim in a loud and vocal way to a world so full of fear, especially now. **“Do not be afraid!”**

Now is the time and we are the people who must say to our own political leaders and to the people of the world - **“Do not be afraid!”**

“Do not be afraid” – if we, as Christians, don’t begin to shout it out in a world polluted by the many messages of fear who will?

As I have been sharing, Fredrick Buechner said: “Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Be Not Afraid!”

“Do not be afraid!” Jesus said and so shall we!

Amen.