

Christmas Day 2020

I remember an argument I had with my brother when we were little. It was about angels. We had a picture book of Bible stories—maybe you did, too, when you were a child, and maybe you still see those pictures in your mind when you hear a certain story from the Bible.

I still do all these years later.

So - our grandmother was reading the Christmas story to us. There were shepherds, excited bearded men in bathrobes and furry vests, surrounded by lambs. And there, against the starry night, was the angel; a lovely young woman in a long, long pale blue dress, with enormous feathery wings and rays of light surrounding her blonde head.

At least, / said it was a girl. That was what the argument was about. My brother insisted that angels were boys. "They are not," I said.

I had never heard such a silly idea. "Look at her. Look at her hair. Boys don't have hair like that."

"That one does," he said and took the book from my grandmother's hands. After a moment of furious page-turning, he handed it to me triumphantly. "See?" he said.

I was dumbfounded. There was another angel, standing guard at the entrance to the garden of Eden, from which Adam and Eve walked miserably away. This angel had long blond hair, too, but he also carried an immense sword, as big as he was and, what was more, the sword was on fire. Who could understand that? That mane of blond curls and those big arms, that flaming sword? Such evidence of masculinity and femininity in one body was too much for me. I decided not to pursue the argument. I turned back to the Christmas page.

"...and the angel said unto them, 'Fear not, for I bring you glad tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people,'" my grandmother read, and I interrupted her. "Why did she say 'Fear not?'"

"Because the shepherds were afraid."

"But why were they afraid of her?" I persisted.

"Him," said my brother, but I took no notice.

"Why were they afraid?"

"Well," my grandmother thought for a moment. "I guess they had never seen an angel before."

"But she's not scary," I persisted. "She's pretty."

"Well, they weren't expecting her, " my grandmother said, "Now, you two be quiet and listen." She continued the story.

And we were quiet, even though we were excited about Christmas and all, and had been at each other for days because we just didn't know what else to do with ourselves. The old words of the were already familiar to us, although we were pretty new in the world.

It was already an old story, even to little children, already a story that made us feel comfortable and safe, a story full of the reassurance and safety for which everyone longs at this time of year. Already we had started to do what Christians have been doing with this story for centuries: domesticating it, looking at it through the lens of our own need, rather than look at it on its own terms.

It really is a story that is full of fear, isn't it? From the moment of the annunciation to the Virgin Mary, who asked a logical question of her heavenly visitor—"How can this be?" she asked, —to the tense negotiations around the possibility of a divorce, to the desperate search for suitable lodging at the most vulnerable moment in a woman's life, the birth of Christ had from the outset been a very precarious thing. It was anything but smooth. Anything but reassuring. Not a thing about it suggested that this was going to be safe. It was dangerous in every way. It was a scary situation, one that required great faith in God on the part of all concerned.

Mary and Joseph, the way they looked in my Bible picture book: she looked so sweet and calm and young; Joseph looked older, but also calm, strong and dependable and reassuring. They are the Mary and Joseph we want them to have been, but they are probably not the Mary and Joseph who really were. The birth of Christ was a story about trust in God in the face of terrible adversity: they were marginal people in an occupied country coping with a difficult and uncertain situation. Only now, after it is over, do we see reassurance in it. What they knew must have been fear.

When you find yourself filled with fear, does that mean that your faith has abandoned you? Are fear and faith incompatible?

I don't see how that can be true. Fear and courage are certainly not incompatible. It doesn't take courage at all to endure something of which you are not afraid. I am pretty sure Rosa Parks was afraid when she refused to yield her seat on the bus to a white man. That Dietrich Bonhoeffer was afraid when he accepted death at the hands of the Nazis? And you, when you face times of trouble and uncertainty and feel the chill of fear in your heart, the clutch of fear in your throats: does that mean that you lost your faith?

Not at all—it just means you have something to pray about, right then and there. Fear is far from being the opposite of faith.

I've wondered what happened to that Bible picture book. So many things from my are childhood are lost—things I remember, pieces of furniture that seemed always to have been there, and always would. Where did it all go, all that hardware that was such a part of my life that barely

noticed it? I remember everything about the bedroom in which we were reading that Bible story book: the dresser and the photographs arranged on it, my grandmother's hairbrush and hand mirror that matched, the chair, the curtains, the wallpaper.

Now it is gone, and the house is gone, and Where has it all gone, and so quickly? We didn't know then—although my grandmother must have begun to suspect—how short life would be. It is very short, we all come to understand, and it is most fragile. You usually don't know this when you are little, but you come to understand it all too well. No wonder we are afraid.

Into this short, precarious life came the Son of God. Ultimate power poured itself into our powerlessness. The Creator accepted the frustrating, sad limits of the created. The source of life entered into a journey that would end in a death we all will face, each on our own particular cross.

A group of simple men—and probably some women too, stared on a hillside at a visitor from another world with a message: "Do not be afraid," was the message. "Today we begin the sanctification of all your sorrow, all your fear, every burden you bear.

Today we begin a journey you can only begin in fear. And all your tomorrows will be lived in the love of God."