

A Word About the Word:

Here's one word to consider for the *Gospel of Luke*, and not just because it's Halloween: *terrified*.

The phrase "they were terrified," is repeated throughout Luke's gospel. Zechariah, the shepherds keeping their flocks by night, and the women at the empty tomb are all terrified by the presence of angels. Peter, James, and John are terrified upon seeing the Transfiguration, as are all the disciples upon seeing Jesus after the Emmaus Road encounter. And while not terrified, Mary is perplexed during her divine encounter. In each instance, the characters are assured with comforting words: "Do not be afraid."

The presence and power of God are awe-striking. It's a natural response to be fearful. A big part of Luke's good news is that God doesn't star in horror movies – God doesn't wear a hockey mask, or a glove with claws, or wield a chainsaw. God's not a zapper. Yes, God manifests a power and a presence beyond our comprehension. But God's power is revealed in ways that defy our expectations. Unlike Halloween monsters, God's power isn't something we need to run away from. We can actually run toward it! God's power is rooted in love. And we needn't be afraid.

A few weeks ago, while holding Josie and watching Mary Allen and Lucy play at the park, a grandfather remarked to me, "I am astonished by the power of love. How is it that a tiny baby can cry out, and a mother can soothe their fear and discomfort by using their voice, and their embrace?" It's not for nothing that Luke's author realizes the same phenomenon.

It is overwhelming, even terrifying to realize that the most complex thing imaginable loves each one of us as intimately as a mother loves a child. It's also startling to discover an actualized hope: The world really can be what God intends it to be.

Do not be afraid, Sardis, for Luke brings you good tidings of great joy!

Gospel Background:

It's hard to pinpoint the exact date of Luke's composition. It could have been written as early as 80 CE, and as late as 100 CE. Let's split the difference, and call it 90 CE, or roughly fifty-five years after the death of Jesus.

Regardless of decade, Christians living in Luke's era endured hardships. Nero's campaign of persecution in the 60s sparked a generations-long culture of suspicion toward Christians within the Roman Empire. Such suspicions created a need for faith communities to exercise discretion in their practices and gatherings, and their discretion meant that non-Christians knew little about Christians. The vacuum of knowledge led to rumors. Christians participated in Eucharist with a liturgy about the Body and Blood of Christ, and in their charity, often received abandoned infants. But to the outsider, this looked a lot like cannibalism! And if something gets said loud enough and long enough, it becomes true. Christians were stigmatized.

The author could have lived in Rome, or perhaps even Antioch, but definitely not Palestine. The goal of the text is to provide an accurate portrayal of Jesus and the early Church (Acts). It's written in a way that would appeal to the Roman establishment. But it's also written by someone who is less familiar with Jewish customs, and most likely someone who is newer to the movement. It has the feel of a national reporter describing a local or regional news event.

Luke's author frames the life of Jesus as being central to God's redemptive purposes for the world. The life of Jesus illumines the divine for entire communities; God is made manifest in the presence of Jesus. The movement of the story reflects this centrality.

Mary, Elizabeth, Zechariah (though begrudgingly at first), Simeon, Anna, and John all offer examples of faithful witness, nurturing, community support, divine recognition, and divine response to ensure fertile ground for Jesus. Jesus mimics and expands upon the generosity, prophetic witness, and hospitality he

receives, and offers it to disciples and extended followers. And in Acts, the community of believers will follow this pattern of faithful discipleship.

Luke's author is also intentional in reminding the audience that God's community will defy societal expectations. Wealth, gender, citizenship, religious tradition, ethnicity, and other classifications do not afford privilege in God's world. Add to that, God rules/reigns unlike the rulers of this world. Women ensure the story is told; Samaritans demonstrate neighborliness; a child of humble origins, in a forgotten region, and born of a complicated relationship is demonstrative of a noble and remarkable birth.

We expect to hear something ordinary. But in the ordinary, we find the extraordinary.

There are lost sheep, and coins, and sons. There are wee little tax collectors who sit on sycamore branches. There are sisters who are skilled at both hospitality and theology. There are mangers that become makeshift changing tables. There's even an angel chorus.

There's an invitation to see God's presence in the world, and to be part of that world. The great thing about Luke is that we never know which of these stories will illumine the invitation. But time and again, one of them always does! May such an invitation jump off the pages for you this time around!

Homily: *Terrified*

One of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s most famous sermons is about the Parable of the Good Samaritan. One of the parts I find most profound about the sermon is that King starts by helping us to empathize with the Priest and the Levite. Their reluctance to help the stranded man is not irrational. They have good reason to be afraid.

Luke
Bob Stillerman
Twenty-First Sunday After Pentecost, 10/30/2022
Luke 10:25-37



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The Jericho Road was a dangerous road, and it was not uncommon for robbers and thieves to prey upon travelers by feigning injury. The Priest and Levite have been around long enough to know that helping this injured man is a recipe for danger. (The old *Saturday Night Live* sketch, *Bad Idea Jeans*, comes to mind!). King says these two men ask a very reasonable question, “What’s gonna happen to me if I stay here?” And if I am being honest with you today, I know I’ve asked that very same question many times myself.

King asserts that the Samaritan chooses to ask a different question: “What’s gonna happen to him if I don’t stay here.” By asking such a question, the Samaritan, or neighbor, refuses to prioritize his safety over the safety of someone else.

I can’t seem to get that phrase “and they were terrified,” out of mind. I know it’s not used in this specific lection, but it’s there. It’s baked into the whole cake.

Here’s the thing. The angel chorus singing to the shepherds; the angel visits and their strange appearances to Mary and Zechariah; the trippy, even quirky account of the Transfiguration; the angel at the empty tomb; Jesus mysteriously appearing at Sunday supper – these stories still move me in the deepest of ways. They paint a picture of the divine for me that encapsulates mystery, and awe, and yet somehow also offers a warm and comfortable approachability. There’s humor in the realness of the characters’ responses. I would be terrified if I witnessed these things, too.

But the supernatural nature of these myths also offers safe distance. God’s vastness and presence are well-illustrated, but these theophanies (that’s a fancy word for a divine appearance) don’t always feel like something we expect to happen to us. Our fear is most likely more bound up in the processing of these accounts. How is this supposed to make me feel? Do I have to believe all of it, or some of it? Is it okay to ask questions? Are the stories strong enough, is God strong enough for me to poke around?

And I find comfort in the response, “Do not be afraid.” Yes, God is strong enough for us to poke around. Yes, God is strong enough for us to struggle, and to process, and to be a little bumpy, and perhaps even feel a little grumpy on our journeys.

But we’re not talking about supernatural theophanies in today’s text. We’re talking something much more tangible, much more likely, much more realistic, and frequent in our ordinary lives: Our safety and the safety of our neighbors. And it’s terrifying!

The Samaritan – the stranger, the outsider, the one who supposedly represents and upholds the antithesis of all those customs, beliefs, and traditions we hold so dear – the Samaritan is not afraid. He’s not afraid to share a little bit of his humanity; he’s not afraid to risk his safety to help secure it for his neighbor; he’s not afraid to live as if God’s presence is right now.

But the Priest and the Levite – the neighbors, the insiders, the ones who supposedly represent the best of who we say we want to be – the Priest and the Levite are afraid. They are terrified. And so are we.

I think we are terrified because this story illustrates our capacity, and indeed our commissioning as agents to help make God’s world a reality.

Spectacular theophanies are infrequent, and while scary, they don’t really require any kind of daily work. But ordinary theophanies, those encounters that allow us to see God’s presence and act with God’s spirit in the meeting of neighbors, ordinary theophanies, happen all the time.

These encounters may not happen in the shadows, and on the shoulder of a curvy mountain road. They may be a bit more subtle. It may be at a stoplight. It may be a person longing to have a difficult conversation. It may be your thoughtful response to the goods you buy, or the policies you vote for, or the way you choose to support teammates. How do your actions affect their

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wellbeing? And in this age of new technologies, your ordinary theophanies may even happen in virtual spaces.

Every one of these theophanies offers an opportunity to ask the same questions as the Priest and the Levite, and the Samaritan. What does my presence here mean for me? What does my lack of presence mean for them?

We don't have to wait for the appearance of angels to de-Samaritanize our neighbors, or to deconstruct the systems that created Samaritanization. We can simply be neighbors to one another.

Yes, it's kind of scary to think about a world turned up-side-down. But fear not, Sardis. This isn't like a Zombie apocalypse, or a *Hocus Pocus* where the Sanderson Sisters are successful. It's more like a world where our intentional neighboring allows us to see, redefine, and ultimately value who those zombies and witches really are: neighbors, and children of God.

As he passed by, a certain man was moved to compassion. The world is a better place for his presence. Good friends, may we be moved in the same way. Amen.