



Fear Not! A New World Is Coming!

I am indebted to Heather McColl, who is the minister at Midway Christian Church, for the theme and titles of my Advent messages. In a meeting we attended in August I asked if anyone had yet thought of themes for Advent, and Heather had both a theme and message titles. She was way ahead of me, and I asked her if she minded if I borrowed the theme, which is *Fear Not* – and the four message titles from her. I am grateful to use her theme and titles, as they helped me very much to formulate the following messages –

- Fear Not! A New World Is Coming!*
- Fear Not! Prophetic Peace Be With You!*
- Fear Not! Sing for Joy!*
- Fear Not! The Baby Means Change!*

Our Scripture reading this morning is Matthew 2:12-18. This passage actually takes place after the birth of Jesus, but it provides the foundation to our message today –

- 12 And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.*
- 13 When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.”*
- 14 So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt,*
- 15 where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.”*
- 16 When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.*
- 17 Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:*
- 18 “A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.”*

I want to talk about three realities this morning, as we consider the message *A New World Is Coming*. The first is –

Reality #1 – Our Tragic and Broken World.

The passage we just read is not very cheerful passage, is it? It's quite a downer, actually. It's probably not a passage we want to hear during Advent, or any other time of the year, for that matter. But it's a passage we need to hear, because it reflects the reality of our tragic and broken world. It reflects the tragic reality of our world not only in the time of Jesus, but also the reality of the world before the time of Jesus, since the time of Jesus, all the way to the tragic reality of our world today. It reflects the tragic reality that we live in a world that is broken, fallen, violent, and far too often indifferent to the fact that suffering is inflicted upon others far too often, even, as we see in this passage, upon young children.

This reality is a jolting reminder that the Christmas story is not a story containing only scenes of peace and beauty. It is a passage that reminds us we live in a brutal world, where the innocent suffer at the hands of tyrants and people taken captive by evil and hatred. That such people, and behaviors, exist will guarantee that fear remains an ever-present force in our lives.

It seems to me that, in recent years, this part of the Christmas story has fallen from our focus, and it's not hard to understand why. Who wants to face such a reality while we're enjoying our decorations, our parties, and our exchanging of gifts? It is a harsh intrusion into a time that is designed in great measure to help us forget some of the difficult realities of life.

Herod was crowned *King of the Jews* in Rome, by the Roman Senate in the year 40 BC. He was, however, a king without a kingdom. Upon his return to the land of Israel, he was provided somewhat of an army and after some years was eventually able to capture Jerusalem. His first order of business was to eliminate all of his predecessors and their allies and all future threats to his rule, and he spent the next roughly 35 years doing so. One of the final acts of his life and his rule was to give the order that leads to the tragedy we just read.

For all of our advances in fields such as medicine and technology, do you know how much we have advanced in the way in which we treat one another? Not much, if any. We are so plagued by violence that every one of us is probably hesitant to turn on the news in the morning because we don't want to hear the litany of violent acts that took place in the previous 24 hours. ISIS is working to blow up our world and in our own country it's one mass shooting after another.

I am, by nature, an optimist. I really do try to look at the world in a positive light. And I am not an apocalyptic kind of person, but there have been plenty of days lately when I've wondered if it's time for me to revisit both of those positions, as I've asked myself, *is this about it? Just when we think it can't get any worse, it gets worse! How much more can humanity take, before completely imploding?*

But the reality is that it has been century after century of such tragedy, down to our time when we see so many people forced from their homes because of tyrants and despots and so many who have lost their lives because of hatred and poisonous ideologies. The names may have changed, but it's the same old story. There is no one named Herod ruling over territory in today's world, but there are plenty who carry on his tragic ways, and there are millions who suffer every day because of their actions.

It's one of the reasons why I think today's Scripture passage is so timely, as we see that Jesus and his family were victims of political instability, tyranny, and as a result became refugees. Have you ever thought about the fact that Jesus and his family were, for a time, refugees? As we live in a time when so many millions of people have been forced to flee their homes, how might this story from the life of Jesus speak to them? It tells us, I think, that dealing with refugees in our world is not just a political question but also a spiritual one. Among *the least of these* in today's world most certainly are the refugees looking for a safe home, and certainly we would recognize the call of Jesus to care for them. But our world too often turns a callous heart and covered eye to the sufferings experienced by so many millions in the world. We don't want to face the reality of millions of people who have been displaced from their homes.

Our world is one of power that is too willing to allow the end to justify any means that become necessary. And it is not just other powers; it is the power wielded by our own leaders and our own nation that is not always a power that leads to peace or justice.

Jesus was not afraid to speak to the leaders of his people and his nation and tell them the hard truth that power is not always used justly, and in the same way we must be willing to speak to our leaders as well and remind them to use power justly and peacefully.

Reality #2 – A New World Is Coming!

I believe that a new world is coming; a new world in which peace will be victorious over violence, love will rule over hatred, and freedom will come to those under oppression. That's the good news. The bad news is, it sure seems like a lot of the old world is left, and that the new world is a long way off, doesn't it? The new world is taking it's time arriving. How long must the insanity continue?

The Biblical record is one of a long-running promise that a new world is coming. One of the great passages from the prophets is Isaiah 2:2-4 –

2 And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it.

3 And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

4 And he shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people: and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

It is easy to be impatient about the promise of a new world. For millenia, the prophets have promised that a new world is coming, and we wait, and wait. But that new world is already here, in some ways. It might not always be obvious, but it is here and it is becoming more of a reality with each passing day. Every time a person allows love rather than hatred to rule their life, the new world takes deeper root. Every time a person walks in the light rather than the darkness, the new world takes deeper root. Every time a person expresses grace over judgment, the new world takes deeper root. Every time a person expresses hope over despair, the new world takes deeper root. Every time a person chooses faith over doubt, the new world takes deeper root.

Some of you really need a new world to arrive. Your world, your reality, has worn you down, has run over you, and has pushed you to the very edge of you faith. Know that a new world is coming!

Reality #3 – Fear is the great determiner between the first two realities – the continuing of our tragic world, or the welcoming of the new world.

There are dozens of times, literally hundreds of times, when either *be not afraid* or *fear not* is used in the Bible. That's a *lot* of references. The *Fear Not* picture on the screen has some of those references included in the background.

Fear is an ever-present influence in our lives. Everyone is shaped by fear in some way, and anyone who believes they are without fear is either one of humanity's great exceptions or they are very much lacking in self-awareness (I propose it to be the latter of those two choices).

It seems my entire life has been one long, unending battle against fear. And I thought once I conquered a particular fear it would reduce my list by one and eventually, one by one, I would scratch each fear off that list until at some point I would arrive at a time when every fear was marked off my list. But I've found that as you go through life, you mark one fear off your list and add two or three more, as there seems to be evermore at stake. When I was young, I worried about myself. Now I worry about my children and the world they will inherit and what their lives will be like in the decades to come.

The Biblical gives us many examples of those who allowed faith to raise them above their fears. Think of the story of the Exodus. Imagine the excitement of leaving bondage in Egypt, but imagine how that excitement turned to fear in the wilderness as you wondered how your family would be fed and sheltered from the harsh elements. Think of the story of the Exile. Imagine what it must have been like, making the long march to Babylon, under the watchful eye of armed guards. Imagine what it must have been like, to walk into the gates of a strange city, whose residents cheered their victorious army while they jeered at you. Imagine what it was like, when the Roman Empire entered into the land and became one more in a long line of oppressive occupiers. Imagine the fear of wondering how life would be under their rule. Imagine the fear of the disciples, watching the crucifixion of Jesus and wondering if they would be next.

Because fear is so powerful and pervasive in life, I find it very interesting that the word is never mentioned in this morning's Scripture passage. Did you notice that? There are certainly ample reasons why fear should have been present. Joseph is told that Herod is seeking Jesus in order to kill him; the family was compelled to flee to Egypt, a foreign country, in a journey that would certainly be fraught with difficulty and danger and where, perhaps, there would be no network of family and friends; there was no promise of economic opportunity, housing, or any of the basic necessities of life that would be guaranteed upon their arrival in Egypt. Those are, in my opinion, very good reasons to become fearful. Perhaps Joseph and Mary were fearful, but if so, it is never mentioned. I prefer to believe that their deep and confident faith allowed them to undertake their journey without fear. In contrast, the earlier part of the chapter, in verse three, we read that *when King Herod heard this* (the news that Jesus had been born), *he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him* (NASV).

I believe that Matthew is very intentional about noting that Herod – the king, and possessor of all the power and privileges that comes with royalty – is filled with fear while no mention is made of Joseph and Mary being afraid. It is, I believe, one of the ways in which Matthew is reminding us that along with the birth of Jesus comes the promise that a new world is coming. It is a world in which a different power will be dominant; it is a world in which the kings and tyrants will no longer be in charge or determine the destiny of those under their rule; and it is a world in which love, justice, and fairness will rule.

As long as we are afraid, we can be controlled. It's the reason tyrants and despots love to instill fear in people and it's the reason why our political leaders will use fear, as they want to control us. But do not yield to fear and do not allow fear to control you life.

Fear may be our ever-present companion in life. We will never be absent of fear, but know this – we do not have to live in a way that allows fear to shape the boundaries of life or place limits upon our faith. Fear not! A new world *is* coming!