

Indomitable Spirits

First Sunday In Advent

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More and more young adults are choosing not to have children, according to recent news reports. This fact, if it's true, has pros and cons depending on whether you are talking to an economist or a climate scientist. But as religious people this is troubling, because of what it says about the hearts of young people. While not everyone chooses to procreate or can procreate, that so many don't feel like the world is a good place to bring a child into—whether because of so few social supports, like parental leave or childcare, or whether because of concern about the future of the planet-- that the obstacles feel daunting and induce fear—is deeply troubling.

The heart of our Christmas story is the birth of a new baby into this world. Yes, this is about this particular baby coming into this world, Jesus, but it's also more universally about new life breaking into a world hardened by empire, greed, and every ism you can think of. As Howard Thurman preaches: *Christmastime is about the growing edge of life—all around us, worlds are dying and new worlds being born. Life is dying and life is being born. Hope is the mood of Christmas.. And the raw materials?: a newborn babe, a life, and a work.*

One of the beautiful things about Christmas time and all of these characters we know so well is that every year of our life we can wonder in new ways about the story and about the characters in the story. *This* morning, this first Sunday in Advent, let us wonder about the angel. The angel is in almost every scene of the Christmas story. We hear their refrain “Fear Not” and their announcement about new life stirring.

And we hear the objections, the understandable objections of the soon to be parents. Joseph: How can this be? I'm a respectable member of this community. Zechariah: How can this be? We're really old. Mary: How can this be? I'm a virgin. Objections coming from their current realities.... (Remember this is about story. Not science. We are not biblical literalists.)

We hear the objections coming from their current realities, the young adults of today reported in the news this week. Have a child? How can I? This planet is burning up... How can I? This soul killing and dangerous racism is baked into our world. How can I? I can't afford an apartment. How can I possibly afford childcare?

And what does the angel say to these objections? First though, banish all thoughts of a saccharine sweet angel with an overly precious demeanor. That's not the angel in *our* story. This angel listens deeply to their objections and fear and understands, but still, looking straight into their eyes with a knowing gaze, seeing their fear, and they looking back into the angels eyes see deep into the holy mystery at the heart of existence, which is goodness, which is love. . And the angel speaks... with kindness but firmly... "Do not be afraid." And then tells them what is going to happen... There *will* be new life coming into this world...

The angel, have *you* noticed this before?, is an indomitable spirit! Willful. Not to be put off, or ignored, or sidetracked. An energy force connected to some great spiritual power.

And the angel doesn't just make one appearance and then go away. The angel comes to Joseph again later in the story, twice, telling him what to do to keep his young family safe. First to flee to Egypt and then, after Herod, dies to return home... The angel tells him firmly "Get up". Don't be passive. Do this big thing and do it now. "Get up", the angel asserts.

And remember the scene in the Christmas story when an angel appears to the shepherds in the field announcing the birth, and telling them where to find this new life? Again, gently but firmly saying to people who are initially afraid of a strange new thing which challenges their current reality, saying the same words again *to these* human beings... "Do not be afraid". And then, remember what happens next, a whole pack of angels rises up, a church load of angels, and sings the shepherds on their way into this new journey... a medley of songs they sing, including, I bet, "choose to hope"...

I wonder whether, I think it so, the angels come to these parents again and again on their life journey with this newborn, then toddler, then child, then youth... saying "fear not" and "get up" and maybe also ... "we got you"...

At a meeting recently, a zoom meeting, a parent with young children said something that just stays with me. He said plaintively and pointedly: "We need hope. Hope for our children's future..."

Could it be that this is our purpose as a church now?! That when we baptize new life (oh some day soon, when we can better protect them, we will baptize two years' worth of babies...), when we baptize them and we make promises to them, all of us do, let us promise that we will be a hopeful people, not a pie in sky by and by kind of hope., but a God's kingdom come on earth kind of hope ... promise to be hopeful—that is, imagining freshly what can be, but not just wishful thinking, and not naive about the obstacles, but truly hopeful, that is smart, hardworking, persevering, undaunted, as we act toward our hopeful mission. Do you remember when we were raising the money and then raising the solar panels and insulating and more, it was when we were doing the work that we were the most hopeful.... And when a battle is lost? like Line 3, a hopeful people gear up for the next battle.

That's to say are we promising to become angels-- a mighty chorus of angels, a church load of angels, a congregation of angels. And to listen deeply to their objections, their real-life assessments, their fears... And then to look them deeply in the eyes and say, "fear not". Our eyes will tell the truth of our fierce and stubborn determination to do everything we can to make it work, to repair God's world, heal the earth, shape a compassionate economy, give reason for hope and a good life. And we'll say to them and to one another: "Now's the time!" "Get up."!

And to those young adults who remain on the sidelines, watching the baptisms warily, those who doubt that they should bring a child into this world as much as they would like to and had planned to...." Do you honestly believe there is hope for our world? For the future of our children and grandchildren?" They ask. And we, the chorus of angels, are able to answer truthfully. YES! (Nature is more resilient than we can know. Though our climate action is urgent, life itself has an innate ability to survive and even thrive. And the human intellect is capable of ingenious, life giving inventions... think vaccines, think renewable energy. And the power of young people is immense and hope is an innate survival trait that seems to exist in every child's head and heart, even though it needs to be encouraged and cultivated. And the wisdom of the elders is not to be ignored. "Things have changed from the hard work of so many", says the 90 plus year old. "Like how we think about women, and sexual orientation, and gender and race, and slavery and servitude. It's changed and changing still".) (Jane Goodall)

We are able to answer truthfully "yes", when they ask. To be sure the power of greed and ignorance, which is evil, is massive and it rears its ugly head in some years, more than others, but the indomitable spirit of love and righteousness is even more powerful. And this indomitable spirit is deeply rooted in us.

Jane Goodall, the famous primatologist, is also an angel, with an indomitable spirit, in a recently published book entitled The Book of Hope: A Survival Guide for Trying Times, she speaks of her hope for the planet, even though our climate change work has to speed up as dramatically as it can, and she says

it can. She talks about how her hope was forged when she was a child in England during WW II. She writes:

I think the whole experience of growing up during that war helped to shape who I am. Even though I was only five years old when it began, I knew or sensed what was going on. I felt the atmosphere. Everything seemed bleak and hopeless—after all, for a time Britain stood alone after the occupation or surrender of most of the other European countries. Our army wasn't prepared. Our navy wasn't prepared. Our air force was puny compared to Hitler's.

But cutting through the despair came Churchill's speeches... .. Sharing his belief that Britain would never be defeated, and this brought forth the fighting spirit in the British people. His most famous speech was delivered when Germany had defeated and overrun much of Europe and things looked really bad for the Allied Forces. But Churchill inspired people saying that we would defend our island to the very end, we would never give up... He didn't hide away from what was going on. During the terrible weeks of the Blitz, when London was bombed night after night, he often went to give words of encouragement to the people sheltering in underground stations... He inspired a renewed determination in everyone to go on fighting Hitler to the bitter end...

I learned as a child that with courage and determination the impossible becomes possible...

Angels refute resignation...And it's not Pollyanna. It's well founded. Angels say, with love but also with firmness: "Fear not" and "Get up".

It's time to prepare for the birth. We're cleaning our homes. Lighting candles. Singing our songs of expectation. It's time now, especially this year, to dust off those powerful angel wings, put on your indomitable spirit. You gotta feed it, your indomitable spirit to keep it strong.... Spend at least as much time taking into your mind and heart inspiring stories and inspiring news and inspiring art lest the hard stuff that seeps into us now through every tech pore, 24-7 suffocates your indomitable spirit. Find ways to act with others, not alone, powerfully and faithfully, especially where the young are leading. And marinate in God, through prayer, meditation, walks in nature, singing in a choir: Let God infuse you with hope and her daughters courage and grit and hard work will come to you.

Yes, put on your angel wings aka your indomitable spirit and appear to those to whom God sends you, especially to the youth, young adults, young parents.... And speak the words, and live them: ... "Be not afraid". "Get up now". "For nothing will be impossible with God".

Sources

Goodall, Jane, and Douglas Abrams, The Book of Hope: A Survival Guide for Trying Times. Celadon Books, 2021.

Thurman, Howard, The Mood of Christmas, Harper and Row, 1973.

“In an Age Like This, Is It Still OK to Procreate?”, (Sunday Styles, New York Times, Nov, 21, 2021)