

Fear Not
Christmas Eve 2016

This is the season for hearing new messages in old stories.

From the ancient story of the birth of a child, we gain new understanding of the gift of peace.

From more modern stories, we gain understanding of what our lives might look like if we could live unselfishly as Ebenezer Scrooge and the Grinch learn to do, or, with Rudolf and George Bailey, how all lives offer gifts to the world.

This season two modern stories in particular illuminated for me the words of the angel to the shepherds, “Fear not. For behold, I bring you good news of great joy for all people;” and “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace, goodwill among people!”

I’ve never thought of the angels’ words as especially important to the story. “Fear not,”- that seemed the equivalent of “hello” when angels speak with mortal beings. They have to get us to calm down so that we can hear what’s really important. And then that song of the angels, I dismissed it as a blessing on a special night. But thanks to a 1960’s Christmas special and a 1940’s novel, this year I think those words might just be the crux of the story for us.

First, the 1960’s TV special. Pretty much for my whole life, every year I’ve watched *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. You too? But it took a friend to point this out to me: throughout the special, Linus holds onto his security blanket. He flicks it into a shepherd’s coif when Lucy tells him he can’t have it with him during the nativity play and insists he will never give it up, even when he grows up. But when he steps into the spotlight to tell Charlie Brown the true meaning of Christmas, he begins with the story of the shepherds and the angel – notice not with the birth of Jesus, and when he proclaims the angel’s words, “Fear not,” he drops his blanket. I wish I could show you this moment – google it at home and watch it. “Fear not” – clearly this isn’t just a message to listen to the angel – this is a life-changing announcement. “Fear not.” This is a life message – do not be guided by your fears. Do not be imprisoned by them. Throw away all which holds you back and live trusting the good news of great joy.

And what is that good news? That’s what the 1940’s novel illuminated for me. Almost as long as I’ve been watching *A Charlie Brown Christmas* I’ve been reading and re-reading *Pilgrim’s Inn* by the English author Elizabeth Goudge. Though when I first picked up the novel at my aunt’s house, I was too young to understand it, her portrayal of children and the magical elements of the story drew me in. It’s not specifically a Christmas story, but it concludes at Christmas, so periodically I re-read it in December. This year, a riff on good will by one of the characters got me thinking about the meaning of those words. So often we think of good will as synonymous with bonhomie (bänə, mē) or good humor, but good will is much more than that. Projecting cheer and friendliness may be a product of good will, but good will is a choice. We will to live goodly – or Godly. What I love about Elizabeth Goudge’s novels is that they portray flawed human beings attempting to live according to their highest principles. That’s what I’ve always loved, but it only struck me this year that they are trying to live with good will.

So when that multitude of the heavenly host sing, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace, goodwill among people!” perhaps it’s more than a song. Perhaps they’re

indicating to us how we can choose to live when we are no longer governed by fear. Fearing not, we can will to live in peace with people.

What might living without fear mean in your life and in our world? As we head into a new year with possibilities that scare many of us, as we ponder whether peace ever can “over all the earth its ancient splendors fling,” even as we deal with family tensions over the holidays, the good news the angels offer us is that the only way for “the whole world to send back the song which now the angels sing” is simply for each of us to choose to sing it.

A Charlie Brown Christmas ends with the Peanuts gang, having acted in good will to bring the scraggly tree to full beauty, gathered around it singing a song of the angels. *Pilgrim’s Inn* ends with some of the characters putting on a play on Christmas Day to which they’ve invited the whole neighborhood and singing

“Sing hey for the God Who fashioned for us
This bountiful splendor of earth,
Sing hey for courage and wisdom and love
For beauty and healing and mirth.
[But most of all for the peace and good will
and the joy of] our human birth.

“Fear not. For behold, I bring you good news of great joy for all people: . . . peace, goodwill among people!” Let us take up that song tonight and in the year to come.

- Pamela M. Barz

Reading

Whatever Faith We Have by William Laurence Sullivan

Whatever faith we have, Christmas confirms it. Whatever hope is in us, Christmas exalts it; whatever love abides with us, Christmas makes it more tender and more deep. Christmas ages not with time, for it utters the profound persuasions of the human heart; and these being forever renewed by mysterious contact with eternal ideals never grow old and cannot die. In Christmas and in the humble child of Christmas, we find assurance that the invincible hunger of our souls is not a mere torment never to be assuaged, but an anticipation destined to victorious satisfaction. This hunger is that the broken shall be made whole; that light shall be shed upon every place of shadows; and that upon every uplifted face shall shine the radiance of divine peace.