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FEAR NOT



THE CATHOLIC NORTHWEST PROGRESS

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In fear-filled world, God tells us to relax, have confidence and trust the Spirit

By Christine Dubois

Again and again, Scripture tells us: "Do not be afraid." The words are on the lips of prophets, angels, even Jesus himself. They echo through the Christmas season. "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God" (Luke 1:30). "Do not be afraid; for behold I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people" (Luke 2:10).

As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ, they are words we need to take to heart today.

"We're frightened, anxious people, and that's what the great prophets saw," says Benedictine Sister Laura Swan, prioress of the St. Placid Priory in Lacey. "God is telling us to relax, have confidence, trust life, trust the movement of the Spirit."

Life in December 2005 isn't necessarily more anxiety-producing than in ages past. Think prehistoric humans hunting saber tooth tigers. But with high speed Internet, talk radio, and 100+ channels of satellite TV, we have plenty of worries to choose from.

To make matters worse, advertisers and government officials vie to keep us anxious about everything from thin thighs to bird flu to terrorist attacks.

"[We're told] that it's patriotic or helpful to be afraid, that it keeps us alert and better prepared," says Tim Malone, co-director of the Ignatian Spirituality Center. "In fact, to live in fear all the time will deplete us so that we won't be able to love the people around us, which is what Jesus calls us to do."

Of course, there are healthy fears. A healthy fear reminds you to buckle your seatbelt, turn off the oven, and look both ways when you cross the street.

Unhealthy fears, on the other hand, tend to paralyze us. We're too afraid of being alone to end a destructive relationship, too afraid of failure to apply for a better job, too anxious about our grades to sleep at night.

"Undue fear is a waste of energy," says Sister Swan. "People who allow it to, it saps their creative energy and distorts their relationship with God. God is



Terri Gaffney, (right), Benedictine Sister Laura Swan (left) and Tim Malone say trust in God will overcome the fear and anxiety of contemporary life.

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not out to get us. God would have us embrace life, not death.”

Worried? Anxious? Afraid? Do what Jesus did

When fear starts to get the best of you, do what Jesus did. Facing the frightening prospect of being nailed to a cross, Jesus went to a peaceful garden, took along his best friends, and spoke with God. It’s a model we’d do well to follow, says Tim Malone, co-director of the Ignatian Spirituality Center.

Get out in nature. Whether it’s exploring the forest, walking down the beach, or watching the birds at your backyard feeder, nature has a way of calming jangled nerves. “Nature helps you get in touch with God’s innate rhythm of life and hope,” says Malone. “Death turns into resurrection, winter turns into spring.” Call a friend. Sharing our fears and our fearful times with people who care reminds us that we’re not alone. Reach out to friends and family members, or schedule an appointment with a priest or spiritual director.

Pray. Prayer opens our hearts and minds to receive God’s love. Tell God exactly how you feel. Meditate on a comforting Scripture passage. Or simply sit with God in silence and listen for God’s word to you.

Most of all, remember that faith doesn’t mean you’ll never be afraid. “Faith,” says Malone, “is living in the face of these [fearful] things with eyes open to God surprising us and giving us abundance.”

How do we heed the call to “Do not be afraid”?

Start by listening. “If people would stop and listen to their fears, they’d see the Holy Spirit is trying to alert them to something,” notes Sister Swan. “A deeper self-awareness, a deeper God awareness. . . . Part of the wisdom of fear is to draw us close to God. To help us realize that God is sufficient for us, and more than sufficient.”

Spending time in prayer will deepen our relationship with God and help quiet our fears. Seattle-based spiritual director Terri Gaffney suggests praying the psalms. They’re “ancient prayers of people like ourselves,” she says. “They really do address that need for praying out of our fear and taking it to God.”

Sometimes, she notes, our fear may be so overwhelming that it’s difficult to pray. In times like those, it helps to know that we’re supported by the prayers of others. One of the strengths of a faith community is knowing that we’re not alone.

Meditating on Scripture is another way to keep our worries in perspective. Scripture, notes Malone, is full of stories of people who lived in difficult times. The ancient Israelites wandered in the desert for 40 years. Jerusalem was sacked and the people taken into exile in Babylon. Mary and Joseph lived in occupied Palestine and fled as refugees to Egypt.

“These stories help me see my own time,” says Malone. “It isn’t like this has never happened before. This has happened to my people. God has carried people through, and God will carry me through now.”

How we spend our time also can have a huge impact on our anxiety level. Do we feed our fears? Or do we focus on staying in the moment, recognizing beauty, and working with others to bring about God’s Kingdom?

“This is a time when we’re invited to be people of great courage,” says Malone. “Even with all this fear around me, this is a moment when I can seize the moment and live fully and receive the life, and life to the fullness, that the Spirit wants to pour into us.”