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ESSAY

Be Not Afraid

By Scott Hoezee | March 24, 2020 | 14 Comments



Some years back, before we even had The Twelve yet I think, I wrote an article in *Perspectives* on a strangely powerful benediction that Neal Plantinga and I had been using for some years. Now seems a particularly apt moment to recall this article, especially since some

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colleagues have mentioned it on social media of late.

It was sometime around 2002 or 2003 when Neal and I first encountered this particular blessing. We were in Atlanta for the installation celebrations when Tom Long became Fred Craddock's successor as the Bandy Professor of Preaching at Candler Divinity School. There were several public worship services as part of the multi-day event as Candler used the installation of Long as a chance to hold also a larger preaching conference. Rev. John Claypool preached at one of those services and at the end gave a benediction that I keenly recall had a great impact on me in the moment.

Thankfully Neal has an incredible memory and was able to recite the blessing almost word for word to the colleague who picked us up at the airport once we got back to Grand Rapids.

There is no definitive version of this blessing but this is how I have been using it:

God go before you to guide you.

God go behind you to protect you.

God go beneath you to support you.

God go beside you to befriend you.

Be not afraid.

Let the blessing of Almighty God,

Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

Descend upon you, settle in around you, and make its home in you.

Be not afraid.

Go in peace.

When I began to use this benediction at Calvin Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids where I was pastor at the time, people quite quickly began to ask for a copy of it. And then just about every time I did a wedding, the family would request this benediction to conclude the ceremony. There were also some funerals—including a tough funeral for a very young child—where the grieving family asked that I give “that one blessing you do.”

Neal used it a lot too as he traveled around preaching as Seminary President and a few years later my colleague Roy Hopp set the benediction to music [in a choral anthem](#). Around that time composer Benjamin Kornelis at Dordt College also [composed a choral anthem](#) on this blessing.

Neal at one point asked Claypool where he got the blessing and as I

recall he could not remember exactly. Near as anyone can tell, it appears to be a riff on the well-known breastplate of St. Patrick that also conveys the all-encompassing presence of God in our lives.

In any event, when I used this blessing at a Livestream service Sunday, two of the 8 people who were in the sanctuary told me they were hoping I would use “that blessing” because its message of “Be not afraid” is more than apt in these otherwise fearful times of COVID-19 and its pandemic spread.

It’s a message I need to take to heart too, as my wife reminded me Sunday evening when we were discussing the uncertainty of the days and weeks—maybe even of the months—to come. Probably there are millions of people in this world who live day to day with some level of uncertainty: where the next meal will come from, whether those planes flying overhead will be dropping barrel bombs on them and their children, whether the water they drink is safe or not. But many of us have been blessed not to live that way mostly. We’re just not accustomed to living with an asterisk next to everything. We’re not used to doing what I did the other day: going ahead a month or two on our kitchen wall calendar and crossing off one event after the next.

And we’re not used to having to stay away from colleagues and loved ones. Face Time and Skype and Zoom are all great—and let’s admit the world can stay connected better now than had this happened

even just 10 years ago when bandwidth and streaming were nothing like they are now—but it's not the same.

Maybe that is why we can take comfort in the idea that when we cannot be physically present to our fellow congregation members, our peers, our coworkers, our students, God is still that all-encompassing presence that the Claypool benediction conveys in such simple yet lyric ways.

I suppose it counts as an irony that the times when we most need to hear the words “Be not afraid” are simultaneously the times when there is the most to fear. “Let not your hearts be troubled” Jesus said in John 14. But he had to say it because he himself was feeling deeply troubled (as he would soon display in Gethsemane) and the disciples had no idea how bad their own troubles were about to get either.

It is never a simple thing to say. “Be not afraid.” It is never a simple thing to achieve. But if God is behind us, before us, beneath us, and beside us by God's Holy Spirit, then neither is such trust a vain hope or illusion, a pie-in-the-sky wish. It's possible because God is here. All around us and all around those whom we love.

Be not afraid.

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Scott Hoezee is Director of the Center for Excellence in Preaching at Calvin Theological Seminary.

14 Comments



Daniel J Meeter

March 24, 2020 at 6:15 am

“The times we most need to hear ‘be not afraid’ are simultaneously the times when there is the most to fear.” Well done, Scott, thanks.

↳ Reply



Lynn Setsma

March 24, 2020 at 6:19 am

The benediction we all need today. Thank you!

↳ Reply



Mark William Ennis

March 24, 2020 at 6:27 am

This is a message that we all need to hear. Thank you.

Be well.

Blessings.

↳ Reply



Kristen VanderBerg

March 24, 2020 at 6:58 am

Thanks Scott!

↳ Reply



Grace Shearer

March 24, 2020 at 7:16 am

Scott, thanks so much for this message. I really appreciate it. Stay well.

↳ Reply

Jan Zuidema

March 24, 2020 at 8:15 am

We hear these words each week from Laura and it has captured my soul in the same way as so many others. Expansive, comforting, challenging. Thanks for the story behind it and especially the Roy Hopp arrangement.

↳ Reply

Henry Hess

March 24, 2020 at 8:23 am

Thank you.

↳ Reply

Jeff Garrison

March 24, 2020 at 9:00 am

Thanks for sharing this. It's perfect for these times.

↳ Reply

Leo Jonker

March 24, 2020 at 9:31 am

Back in 1976 I heard the boys choir of England's York Minster Cathedral sing this blessing as they slowly walked out of the cathedral at the end of a service. It is the one part of the service I remember after all those years.

↳ Reply

RLG

March 24, 2020 at 10:08 am

Thanks, Scott, for an article that is an encouragement to many in this time of trial. I was reading an article on the psychology of invisible companions that children often have. Quite often they serve a good purpose, up until a point, if the invisible companion acts as a friend rather than an hostile force, bully, or bad influence. Christian parents often encourage such a relationship with the invisible Jesus. Although we can't see Jesus he is there to protect and care for us. We teach songs to them such as, what a friend we have in Jesus, and even find encouragement in such songs ourselves, as adults. Indeed, Scott, be not afraid.

↳ Reply

Harvey Kiekover

March 24, 2020 at 10:12 am

Comforting, powerful, expressive, beautiful—a benedictory word we all need today. The choral arrangement is gorgeous. Thanks again, Scott.

Harvey

 Reply

Pam De Jong

March 24, 2020 at 10:53 am

Thank-you for sharing this comforting, rock solid blessing — one we need to hear and repeat often in these days of uncertainty. Blessings on your and yours.

Pam

 Reply

Rich Glendening

March 24, 2020 at 11:18 am

I would love to hear my church choir sing this benediction.

 Reply

Ron Rozema

March 24, 2020 at 6:06 pm

Thanks Scott. I had tears when I first heard this benediction from you years ago and still do whenever I hear it. So powerfully reassuring. Thanks for your comments.

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