

The Angel Said, “Hakuna Matata”

Christmas is a time that overflows with wonderful waves of emotion. It is a time of anticipation that great things are just ahead, of Jesus is coming into the world. Especially with children, there is almost unbearable excitement that all the waiting for this magical celebration is almost, almost over.

Christmas is the season of Joy to the World. The joy of loud celebration and quiet tears of joy as long-separated loved ones gather together at this special time of year.

It is a time for awe and wonder. Of kindness, of sharing the love of God, singing old familiar carols, and wishing everyone peace on earth, good will to all people. We say Merry Christmas in our greetings because it’s a time for smiles and laughter and fun.

But that isn’t how Christmas started. If we pay attention to the details of the story, we find that the Christmas observance began with a completely different emotion. Here’s the scene:

Out on a hillside on the outskirts of Bethlehem, a group of shepherds took turns watching their flocks of sheep through the night. Shepherds in that region seldom owned any sheep themselves. They were generally unskilled workers--the young and uneducated who couldn’t find a better way to make a living.

Shepherding was tough work, with long hours out in the cold and dark and wind and occasional rain. It was a dirty job and it didn’t pay well.

Who knows how long these shepherds had been at it, what their mood was, or what the weather was like. All we know was that they were putting in their time tending sheep through what was probably the same old, same. . . when without any warning, the skies blew open.

According to the Gospel of Luke, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them.

And what was their reaction? They were terrified. We kind of gloss over that word in the story, but it is important. They were not just a little scared or uneasy or confused.

The blinding brilliant light and the sudden appearance in the sky of an overwhelming spiritual presence *terrified* them. That means the first thought of the first people to encounter the message of Christmas was not Joy to the World, or Peace on Earth, or Glory to God in the Highest. It was “This is the end! We’re all going to die!”

Now I have been to a lot of Christmas Eve services and sung a lot of Christmas hymns and carols. And I have yet to hear anyone at those services say or sing, “Christmas is here! We’re all going to die!”

It is easy to overlook the fact that before Christmas could be celebrated, the angel had to do something to prepare the shepherds to receive the news of Christmas.

So the angel said, *“Hakuna Matata.
What a wonderful phrase
Hakuna Matata
Ain’t no passing craze
It means no worries
For the rest of your days.
It’s our problem-free philosophy
Hakuna Matata.”*

You may recognize that song as being from the cartoon musical, “the Lion King.” And again, I have never heard anyone sing these words of an animated warthog as a Christmas carol.

Maybe the angel did not use that tune or exactly those words. On the other hand, the shepherds didn’t speak English, so the angel didn’t actually say *any* of those words that we read as the Christmas story. It’s a translation.

Hakuna Matata is simply another translation. It is a Swahili phrase that means, “no worries, no fear.” Whether you translate it “Do not be afraid” or “Hakuna Matata,” that is the message the angel brought. Those words instantly changed the Christmas mood from stark terror to awe and wonder.

Do not be afraid is one of the most important and consistent and ignored messages of the Christmas story. Human beings tend to be fearful creatures, especially when it comes to spiritual experiences.

In Luke’s Christmas story, it was not just the shepherds who were terrified. Virtually every encounter with the spiritual world was terrifying.

It began with Zechariah, who was standing by the altar of incense in the temple when he suddenly encountered a messenger from God. Luke reports that when this happened, Zachariah “was terrified and fear overwhelmed him.” I imagine his legs turned to jelly and he started pleading incoherently.

But the angel said to him, “Hakuna Matata. Do not be afraid.”

Then an angel appeared to Mary. We don't hear the details this time on how scared Mary was. But we know she was frightened because the first thing the angel said to her was "Hakuna Matata. Do not be afraid."

In the Christmas story, the messengers of God always come bearing the same message. *Do not be afraid.*

This message does not occur only in the Christmas story. It was the first message conveyed throughout the entire Bible whenever God or a messenger of God, or a vision of God appeared to a significant character of faith.

In the first book of the Bible, Genesis, Abraham encountered God in a vision. He must have been terrified because the first thing he hears is:

Hakuna Matata.

God appears to the slave girl, Hagar, in the desert and opens with the words, "Do not be afraid."

God appears to Isaac during a time of stress and conflict, and starts out with those same words.

The prophet Daniel had a vision from God, and he was so scared that God had to tell him twice, "Hakuna Matata. Do not be afraid."

The list of people in the Bible who cringe in terror upon experiencing the divine reads like an honor roll. Moses, Joseph, Samuel, David, Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Joel all begin their experiences with God in such fear that the encounter has to begin with "Hakuna Matata."

The Israelite leaders in turn have to keep reminding their followers in incident after incident, "Do not be afraid." Joseph, the son of Jacob, Joshua, Samuel, Boaz, David, Jonathan, Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel—all of the good guys in the Bible—when they come to the people with a word from the Lord, so often the first words they say are: do not be afraid.

If you look up all the directives that Moses gave to the Israelites, guess which one is repeated most often? What is the most persistent message he drills home to those in his care? Hakuna Matata

Going on to the New Testament, Jesus calms Peter, the disciples, Jairus, and others with these same words. The awe-inspiring and wonder-filled story of Easter begins in the same way, with messengers of God telling women at the tomb and the disciples, "Hakuna Matata."

In the Acts of the Apostles, when Paul is imprisoned, he twice receives visions of a visitation from God that begin, "Do not be afraid."

In Revelation, John's vision begins with God telling fearful people, "Do not be afraid."

In other words, from the first book of the Bible to the last, *whenever* God comes near to humans, the first and most urgent message they hear is: Hakuna Matata, do not be afraid.

This happens on 42 different occasions in the Old Testament and 25 occasions in the New Testament.

Do you think maybe the Bible is trying to tell us something?

We hear the message of Christmas as "Peace on earth, goodwill to all people." And that's what's on the postcards and in the Christmas carols. But the Bible says that before that message can be spoken, we have to hear "Do not be afraid."

Looking over how Hakuna Matata connects with the concept of peace in the Christmas story and how it relates to the coming of Christ, we find that there are two meanings of peace in the Bible.

One of those meanings is simply the absence of war. This is the definition of peace that we use most often. When we pray for peace in the prayers of the church, we are usually asking for an end to violence and warfare.

When people express the wish for world peace, they're usually thinking of an end to bloodshed and armed struggle.

And so when, in the Christmas story, we hear the angels proclaim, "Peace on earth," that's likely what we have in mind. God is promising a future world in which all the fighting stops. That is certainly something worth anticipating, worth praying for.

For those who are trapped in the midst of warfare, the prayer for peace is urgent, desperate, and overshadows any other prayer we could offer.

There is a second meaning of peace in the Bible, however, a much broader meaning, that is closely related to Hakuna Matata. It is a meaning that applies to every person, every day, in every time and place, whether they live in a bomb-shattered neighborhood in Iraq or a quiet farm in rural Wisconsin, or on the streets of New York City.

The Christmas story tells us that when you take away fear and worry, what do you have? Peace on earth, goodwill to all.

Again, this is not just the Christmas story; it's the Bible's story. In the gospel of John, Jesus says, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you." There are a dozen other places in the Gospels where Jesus says similar words.

There are dozens of instances in the Epistles where Paul or Peter, or whoever was writing these books, says, "Peace be with you." The Bible constantly drums home these two interlocking messages. *Do not be afraid. Peace be with you.*

Christmas is a combination of taking away and giving. Taking away fear. Bringing peace. Peace does not come until you get rid of the fear.

Fear is at the root of virtually every relational problem among nations in the world today. Fear turns neighbors into enemies. Fear of others causes us to demonize them and they to demonize us. Fear creates insane military arms races.

Fear that we might not get enough of the world's resources sparks cutthroat competition between nations. Fear of not having enough makes us stingy instead of the giving people we were created to be.

Fear robs us of the ability to think calmly and rationally. Fear of the future paralyzes us and make poor choices.

Fear causes us to circle the wagons and declare that's it's us against the world. Fear causes us to focus solely on survival, on protecting me and mine, on getting all I can get for me and who cares what happens to anyone else? Fear prevents us from fulfilling the great command to love the Lord our God with all our heart and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves.

God does not like fear. Whenever God comes near to humans, the first thing God says is, "Get rid of that fear. Fear is destroying you, fear is strapping you down, locking you in, walling you off. Fear is robbing you of a full and productive and meaningful life. Fear is preventing you from being the people you were meant to be."

In the Christmas story, the angel comes to the terrified shepherds with the message, "Hakuna Matata. Get rid of your fear and put joy in its place. Because when you do that, the result is "Peace on Earth to all people."

That peace is not something we can achieve by ourselves. It is why Immanuel keeps coming to us; it is why God keeps drawing close to us. Because without God, there is no escape from fear; it will dog us for the rest of our days. Without God calming our fears, peace is impossible.

Getting rid of fear is more easily said than done, which is why God and the messengers from God have to keep repeating that message, from the first book of the Bible to the last.

Despite the terrifying antics of fire & brimstone preachers, God and fear do not live in the same place. They cannot coexist. When God takes over, fear has to leave. As God draws near to us this Christmas, God's message comes with the same words that have been used since the beginning of time:

Do not be afraid. Exit fear. Enter peace.

Does this really mean no worries for the rest of our life? Well, that's a little simplistic, and that's probably why we don't sing *Hakuna Matata* as an anthem or a Christmas carol. There will be challenges, obstacles, tragedies, loss, and pain in every life. Sometimes it may seem like more than we can stand. Trying to deny that is just silly.

What it does mean, in the words of the Psalmist, is that
*Those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles;
They will run and not grow weary,
They will walk and not be faint.*

Or in the words of another Psalmist, *With God as our shepherd, though we walk in the valley of the shadow of death, we will fear no evil. We will be at peace.*

When we share the peace with each other in church, we are saying Hakuna Matata. We declare that when God comes to us, we no longer need to live our lives in fear; we live in God's peace. If you're feeling adventurous, feel free to use Hakuna Matata when we share the peace today.

When God comes near, exit fear. Enter peace. Can there be a greater Christmas present than that?

Hakuna Matata, Merry Christmas and peace to all people on earth.