

Be Not Afraid

January 18, 2026

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In his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality... I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word.”

Now, despite what some might imagine, you’re not just handed a Nobel Peace Prize without having done some work, without having spent an extended time making the world better for other people. MLK had seen some awful, despicable, inhumane stuff. Beatings and lynchings and dogs sicced on children. Bomb threats. Jail cells. And yet, he believed that truth and love — not sentimental truth, not Hallmark-card love, but unarmed truth and unconditional love — would have the final word.

Be not afraid.

If you’ve been going to church for any extended amount of time, you’ve heard that phrase from scripture. Be not afraid. And if you’ve been coming to Union for any extended amount of time, you’ve also heard me say this: anytime the Bible tells people not to be afraid, it’s because something terrifying is happening.

Sure, I said it to my daughter at the dentist this week — “You don’t have to be afraid, sweetie, the X-ray isn’t going to hurt.” But far more often, “do not be afraid” is spoken because the world has become unstable, because the powers are flexing, because the ground is shaking beneath people’s feet.

And in scripture, the reason given for courage isn’t, “because everything is fine.” The reason not to fear is because God is with you.

Friends, there are terrifying things happening right now. There are reasons to fear. And God is with us.

I. Naming the Evil — and the God Who Refuses to Look Away

We gather this MLK weekend not in the glow of nostalgia, but in the heat of emergency. Renee Nicole Good was shot and killed in Minneapolis while trying to watch out for her neighbors. ICE continues its campaign of terror in cities like Minneapolis and across this country—disappearing people from their jobs, their homes, their schools. Families are living with contingency plans for being vanished. Attorneys’ numbers memorized. Phone locations shared “just in case.”

This is not accidental. It is strategic.

Russell Vought—the architect of Project 2025—said the quiet part out loud: “We want the bureaucrats to be traumatically affected... We want to put them in trauma.”

That is not policy. That is cruelty with a mission statement.

And cruelty never stays contained. Terror never honors borders. Violence never keeps promises about who it will spare.

Scripture is not naïve about this. The Bible does not blink when empire gets brutal. The prophets did not whisper polite objections. In our passage from Isaiah today we hear the LORD saying, “I have long held my peace... now I will cry out like a woman in labor.” Then God says, “I will turn darkness before them into light, the rough places into level ground.”

Notice: God does not deny the darkness. God moves through it.

And Paul, writing to the church in Rome—a community living under an empire that could crush them at any moment—does not offer escape. He offers resistance: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.” In other words: do not let brutality be the thing that teaches you how to live.

II. Do Not Become What You Are Fighting

Let’s be honest. Many of us are angry. Furious. Incensed. As my colleague Rev. Derek Penwell put it, some days it feels like we want karma to swing a bat. (And Penwell is the pastor of one of the so-called “Peace Churches.”)

The Bible understands that feeling. The psalms ask God to break the teeth of the wicked. Jesus flipped tables. Righteous anger is not a failure of faith. It is often the evidence of it.

But here is the line we cannot afford to cross. Friedrich Nietzsche warned, “We must beware when we fight monsters lest we become monstrous.” Paul says it this way: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

That does not mean being passive. It means being precise. Because hatred corrodes. It eats the container it’s poured into. And the goal of trauma-based regimes is not just to hurt the vulnerable—it is to deform the souls of everyone within its reach.

This is why the image of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery matters so much right now. In that story from the Gospel of John, a crowd has stones in their hands. Law, order, righteousness on their side. And Jesus does not shout from a safe distance. He does not send a message. He steps into the space between the stones and her body. He puts his own flesh in the line of fire. That is the shape of Christian resistance.

As I wrote to you on Friday, the Right Rev. Rob Hirschfeld, the Episcopal Bishop of New Hampshire, said, “This is not the time for statements. It is time to put our bodies between the powers of this world and the most vulnerable.”

That is not metaphorical.

III. Organize — Because Love Needs a Body

We need to act, because Love needs a body. MLK never confused love with sentimentality. He said, “Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice.” Love without structure is a wish. Love without strategy burns out.

Romans 12 is not vague. “Let love be genuine... hold fast to what is good... extend hospitality to strangers... associate with the lowly... persevere in prayer.” This is not poetry alone. This is a blueprint.

Organizing is how love shows up on time. It looks like calling your representatives about ICE enforcement even if your own family feels safe—for now. It looks like showing up when our neighbors’ lives are on the line. It looks like giving money, sharing resources, refusing silence.

MLK said, “The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral... The ultimate strength of love is that it can transform an enemy into a friend.” But he also said, “Justice too long delayed is justice denied.”

Church, courage is not the absence of fear. Courage is fear that has found its marching orders. And hear me clearly: this moment is not asking us what we believe. It is asking us what we are willing to risk. The question before us is not whether God is still at work. The question is whether we will join God where God already is—standing in the gap, between the stones and the body, between the boot and the neck, between the policy and the person it is meant to crush.

MLK warned us that “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” He also told the truth most people want to avoid: “Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of people willing to be co-workers with God.”

Co-workers. Not spectators. Not commentators. Not people waiting for history to improve.

This is not a season for admiration of courage. It is a season for the practice of it.

So let the world know what kind of church this is, what kind of Jesus follower you are. A church that will not be traumatized into submission. A follower that will not be conformed to cruelty. A church that will not outsource its conscience to politicians, courts, or empires.

Let them know we will show up. That we will organize. That we will put our bodies where our prayers are. That we will protect the vulnerable even when it costs us comfort, reputation, money, or safety. Because the Gospel we preach, the God we worship, is not afraid of power. It has already faced it. And it rose anyway.

God is not finished. Justice is not canceled. Love has not lost its nerve.

So no — be not afraid is not a command to calm down. It is a summons to stand up.

- Stand up for the disappeared.
- Stand up for the targeted.

- Stand up for the neighbor whose name the empire hopes we won't learn.
- Stand up until the stones fall from trembling hands.
- Stand up until the darkness breaks.
- Stand up until unarmed truth and unconditional love have the final word.

They are trying to traumatize us into silence — and we are about to become the loudest love they've ever heard.

In the name of the living God, be not afraid.

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels
 Union Congregational United Church of Christ
 Green Bay, Wisconsin
Romans 12:1-2, 9-21; Isaiah 42:14-16
 January 18, 2026

Those who have died in ICE custody / been killed by ICE since January 2025:

Genry Ruiz Guillén
 Santos Banegas Reyes
 Ismael Ayala-Uribe
 Serawit Gezahegn Dejene
 Norlan Guzman-Fuentes
 Maksym Chernyak
 Miguel Angel García Medina
 Juan Alexis Tineo-Martinez
 Huabing Xie
 Brayan Garzón-Rayó
 Leo Cruz-Silva
Nhon Ngoc Nguyen
 Hasan Ali Moh'D Saleh
 Marie Ange Blaise
 Josué Castro Rivera
 Abelardo Avellaneda Delgado
 Gabriel Garcia Aviles
 Jesus Molina-Veya
 Kai Yin Wong

Johnny Noviello
 Francisco Gaspar-Andrés
 Isidro Pérez
 Pete Sumalo Montejó
 Tien Xuan Phan
 Shiraz Fatehali Sachwani
 Chaofeng Ge
 Jean Wilson Brutus
 Lorenzo Antonio Batres Vargas
 Fouad Saeed Abdulkadir
 Oscar Rascon Duarte
 Delvin Francisco Rodriguez
 Nenko Stanev Gantchev
 Keith Porter
 Geraldo Lunas Campos
 Luis Beltran Yanez-Cruz
 Luis Gustavo Nunez Caceres
 Parady La
 Renee Nicole Good