

One of the things Saint John Paul II would often say are the words that the angel says to Joseph in our Gospel this week: do not be afraid. The same words are said to Mary when the angel visits her too. Surely there would be a lot for both of them to be fearful of; what of our plans for the future? What might people think? How will this all work out? But rather than do it their way, they did it the Lord's way. They trusted, and were also willing to change their mindsets and hearts knowing that God had different plans. And because of that, the world was changed.

While generally angels don't go around visiting us and having conversations, God certainly speaks to us in different ways - if we listen. And often that message might be to not be fearful; or to look at our lives and to make a change as God is challenging us to look at things differently. When we listen, like Mary and Joseph, good things happen!

Dr. Marty Becker is a veterinarian known to many from Idaho, who is a regular on *Good Morning America*, and along with writing and speaking also regularly practices veterinary medicine in northern Idaho at VCA North Idaho Animal Hospital.

He has a dog, a rescue pup, which is a mixture of a Chihuahua-Jack Russell-Dachshund; "two dogs long and a half dog tall" as he puts it. And at one point in their relationship, he recalled how his dog, named QT Pi ("Cutie Pie"), tucked his little white paws under Dr. Marty's body and trembled in his arms. As a veterinarian at VCA North Idaho Animal Hospital, Becker is usually the one easing pet parents' fears, but on that day early in their relationship he couldn't calm his own. Or his dog's.

QT Pi is Becker's heart dog, the one who always wants to be by his side. He'd adopted him from a litter of shelter puppies that had distemper. He had spent a week in intensive care at Washington State University College of Veterinary Medicine, Becker's alma mater. Afterward, he had taken care of him at home.

Now Becker had brought QT Pi to the clinic for the first time. He was there for a dental cleaning, a procedure that required general anesthesia. When Becker walked in and tried to hand him over to his colleague, QT Pi clung to Becker, panting and shivering. Becker kissed his nose. "You're going to be fine," he said, wishing he understood. He whimpered as Becker peeled him away and stepped outside.

Becker found himself shaking too, and it wasn't just that he was anxious because there's a risk of an adverse reaction anytime an animal is put under anesthesia. The fear that his little dog felt hit Becker someplace deep inside. What was going on here? He took a slow breath in and out. The last time he felt like this was at a lecture.... He'd wanted to be a veterinarian ever since he was a young boy growing up on a dairy farm in Idaho. He graduated from veterinary school in 1980 and went into practice in southern Idaho. His career grew. His wife, Teresa, and Marty moved halfway up a mountain in northern Idaho in 1997, to a horse ranch that they call the Almost Heaven Ranch.

In 1996, he received the wonderful opportunity to become the veterinary correspondent for Good Morning America. He joined the team at the Dr. Oz Show in 2009.

Becker had been practicing veterinary medicine for almost three decades by then, and he was thinking about retiring. Then at a conference that year, he went to a lecture by famed veterinary behaviorist Dr. Karen Overall. It had been a busy conference, and he was tired. Becker stood up, thinking he'd slip out early.

"Fear is the worst thing a social species can experience," he heard Dr. Overall say. Becker stopped short.

"It causes permanent damage to the brain." Becker turned and sat back down.

Dr. Overall explained that pets are like one-year-old children. She asked the attendees to imagine being taken against your will, having no control, being unable to escape, feeling pain that they couldn't understand. "Think back to a time as a child when you felt manhandled, threatened or abused," she said.

The memories came flooding back, memories Marty thought he'd put behind him. His two sisters, brother and Marty were in the car returning home from a trip to the grocery store with their mom. They chanted a little verse they'd made up: "Daddy's in a huffy puff. Daddy's in a huffy puff."

They were too young to understand, but their father was in the grip of two diseases that would go undiagnosed and untreated until later in his life: alcoholism and bipolar disorder. They never knew what kind of state they'd find him in.

The house was quiet as they unpacked the groceries. Marty thanked his lucky stars that his dad was nowhere around. Later that night, as he huddled in his bedroom just off the kitchen, he heard Mom and Dad fighting. Again.

"Outta my way!" Dad yelled. The angry words escalated. Things crashed, and Mom screamed. Marty shivered under the covers. "I'm going to kill you!" Dad bellowed. Marty could feel his rage through the thin walls. He was so frightened, He couldn't move. Mom started crying. A door slammed. The fight was over, for now. But Marty knew there would be more.

He'd lived with that fear throughout his childhood. In the car when Dad drove, zipping down dirt roads at a hundred miles an hour while Marty clung to his seat for dear life. Or when he played in the fields, barely old enough to tie his own shoes, and Dad would push Marty up onto the driver's seat of the hay baler, and laugh when he screamed, terrified, because Marty couldn't handle the huge machine.

Traumatic childhood experiences can teach resilience, Marty reflects. He became a high achiever, striving for top grades in school and, later, for the biggest market share

for the veterinary hospitals he owned. He was very competitive and never wanted to show weakness.

Even in his personal life, Marty was driven. Teresa and Marty married in his third year of veterinary school, and they built the stable, happy family he'd longed for as a boy. A pastor friend helped Marty learn to accept the pain of his past. He came to trust in the love of God, the father who would never fail him. His positive, high-energy, can-do self shielded his vulnerabilities so well that he almost forgot he had them.

Until Dr. Overall's lecture drew them to the surface again.

Marty says he's always done his best for his patients. Looking back, however, he hadn't always recognized the signs of fear: shivering, shaking, yawning, panting, salivating, leaning away, glancing at the door, even biting.

When Marty had seen a dog lie perfectly motionless on the exam table, he thought he was calm. Dr. Overall explained that he was likely paralyzed with fear. The way he had been the night he'd heard his dad yelling that he was going to kill his mom. Just recalling it made Marty feel shaky, as vulnerable as a child again.

If fear still had such a hold on him even though he could talk to a counselor and lean on the comfort of his faith, how must it be for helpless animals, Marty wondered? The animals whose suffering he'd promised to prevent and relieve when he took his veterinarian's oath?

Marty had to face the truth: Although he had the best of intentions, there were times he had actually caused his patients trauma. Back in veterinary school in the late 1970s, they didn't receive training in animals' emotional well-being. The focus was on their physical health. Even pain management was pretty basic.

Marty says he knew God had nudged him to stay at that lecture for a reason. Genesis says God gave us humans dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and every living thing that moves upon the earth. He entrusted animals to our protection and care. Marty wanted to do better by them. "Show me a better way to treat animals," he asked God. "A way free of fear."

Marty realized he couldn't retire yet. He had more to learn, to do. He talked to and studied the work of veterinary behaviorists. Alleviating fear would improve the well-being of both pets and their people.

He notes that not only could fear and anxiety in cats and dogs mask other health problems, but these emotions were also at the root of most aggressive behaviors. Behaviors that could destroy the human-animal bond and lead to abandonment, relinquishment or euthanasia.

Dr. Marty experimented using treats and toys to distract pets from procedures. He researched FAS (fear, anxiety and stress) pheromones, chemical signals animals give off that send a message to others of the same species.

He says that's what QT Pi must have sensed from the other dogs at the clinic entrance, He thought about his dog as he waited for the procedure to finish, how his dog was so bonded to him that he'd picked up on Marty's fear, anxiety and stress too. God was nudging Marty again, he says, as he had at the lecture, reminding him of his vulnerability in order to galvanize him into action. It was time to put his ideas into practice.

The next week, when QT Pi and Marty returned to the clinic for his vaccinations, Marty made sure the outside area was cleaned to remove FAS chemicals and then spritzed with pheromones that would evoke a calming response. Because he'd balked at the front door, he brought in QT Pi through the side door, where he hadn't formed any unpleasant associations. There was no shivering, no trying to escape this time.

In the exam room, he squirmed at the sight of the big metal table, so Marty set him on the floor and got down beside him. His ears perked, and his tail wagged. Marty brought him in hungry, so he knew he'd respond better to food rewards. As his colleague readied the syringe, Marty used a can of spray cheese to write "QT Pi" on a bumpy rubber pad called a licky mat. His dog licked his name off the mat and barely noticed when he got his injection. Marty hugged him close, and he kissed his face. What a difference it was from the last time.

From then on, Marty became more committed to implementing his new techniques and teaching them to others. He worked with veterinary behaviorists to enhance the emotional well-being of pets in all aspects of their lives. In 2016, I formally launched the Fear Free Certification Program, an online course designed to help veterinary professionals eliminate fear, anxiety and stress and create a more rewarding experience for all.

Today more than two thirds of all veterinary students graduate Fear Free—certified. Plus, they have Fear Free programs for pet professionals (such as groomers and dog sitters), shelters and pet parents.

Marty notes though that none of this would have happened if God hadn't put him where he would hear what he needed to hear and feel what he needed to feel. Reliving the pain and fear of his past showed him that vulnerability is a strength, not a weakness. It gave him a deeper empathy for and understanding of the animals God has given us to love and care for—animals who, like his QT Pi, love and care for us right back.

The good that Dr. Marty's program has done has helped thousands of animals and change the face of veterinary medicine; but it took him looking at his own fears too and dealing with them, and also being open to a new way of looking at things, making changes to how he practiced medicine. For us too, when we confront our fears, and are

open to change in our lives, what we will find is so many good things await us as we cooperate with God's plans.

With respect to fear, "Be Not Afraid" is actually written 365 times in the Bible - one for every day of the year. It seems God needs to remind us humans of this more than once. Saint John Paul II said "Have no fear of moving into the unknown. Simply step out fearlessly knowing that I am with you, therefore, no harm can befall you; all is very, very well. Do this in complete faith and confidence." We can't live life well if we are surrounded by fear and anxiety. So how to deal with fear?

For one, we have our priorities right. Pursing a lesser good at the expense of a greater good is stupidity; hence we value life, so putting your life at risk recklessly is foolish. But you take the martyrs like Maximilian Kolbe, or Thomas More or Edith Stein, these people valued God above all else so faced death without fear. They knew it does nothing for a man to have the world but lose his soul, which was their greatest fear. Knowing that God is with us - which is what we celebrate at Christmas - through the good and bad times, will allow us to overcome smaller fears. When we have that as top priority, we can face difficult things with greater strength; so we don't have the fear of ending a toxic relationship, or standing up to a bully, or failing at something God has called us to do.

Secondly, we have to identify our fears too, not bury them. As with Dr. Marty, sometimes we push things down, and hide them, but don't ever deal with them. Maybe it's something from our past; or maybe it's something a loved one is doing that needs to be addressed but we fear the confrontation; or we keep putting something off we know we need to do because we are afraid of what the doctor might say. When we have time for introspection and reflection, like Dr. Marty at that lecture, we can identify these fears and hit them head on.

Third, we journey with others. Mary and Joseph have one another. God gives us people to help us - for we can't do it alone. Finding someone to talk to about our fears can help; don't fear opening up to your spouse or a true good friend; consider a good counselor if you think that might help; or seek resources to help you make better choices if trying to overcome an addiction, or get out of a bad situation. As with the man who died in the flood but told the guy in the car God would help him, and then the man in the boat God would help him, and then the man in the helicopter God would help him and then met God who asked him where were you and said well I sent a car, a boat and a helicopter, we need to identify these folks too who are there to help us.

And lastly with respect to fear, we become people of courage through both attack and endurance, which we see through the life of Jesus. Anger is one of the deadly sins, but as I remind folks in confession, it's an emotion and has it's place. There is holy wrath; where we take action against evil. Jesus most famously does this overturning the table. We have to do this too; think of Forest Gump rescuing Jenny when a man strikes her and Forest ruins the "Black Panther Party." Maybe we see an injustice; a loved one in an abusive relationship; a parent screaming obscenities at an official at a youth sports

event; or a business in a community aggressively advertising immorality. In these instances, getting active right away to bring about change and let good triumph is important. But courage can also mean dealing with the trials and suffering patiently through a tough situation where you can't attack the evil directly; such as a parent realizing they can't "fix" a growing child who's left the faith right away; or a person holds their ground and doesn't give up such as when trying to change laws on abortion that seem entrenched. Think of Mary and Joseph and how they had to embrace this kind of fortitude and courage; fleeing their homeland, Mary seeing her husband die; and then having a sword pierce her heart but trusting in God's plan, famously saying "do whatever He tells you" at the wedding at Cana. In our difficulties, in persevering for the greater good, in sticking it out as we try to love others especially our families, we can keep our eyes fixed on the ultimate good that will get there in time with patience.

One final note related to fear: sometimes the thing we fear the most can be change, which is also so important for spiritual growth. As Jesus is about to come into the world, change is coming with Him. Every parent knows the birth of a child brings about much change to their life; and hopefully we ponder that what the birth of Christ means for us too. How as God changed our lives? Or, to put it another way, what is God telling us to change or do differently, as He did in the life of Dr. Marty? In all of our lives, as I mentioned last week citing the psychologist Dr. Jordan Peterson, we can identify things that need to change. But it's not easy to change, for we are often stuck in a rut, bury the past, or think we have it all sorted out. We need to listen to the voice of God who may be saying time to do this, or step away from that, or to do this differently. Christ's coming into the world is meant to change us for the better, and we all have work to do and it starts with listening to God and the messengers He sends.

I've never had a dog named QT Pi and probably never will, but Kirby as you know was the first dog who came into my life. A rescue, this gentle giant over a period of months came to trust me more and more. The first Fourth of July wasn't easy though - he hated loud noises, and the fireworks frightened him as they shot them off near the church. I remember though going to find him where he was hiding in the closet, and just holding him gently and he was shaking with fear. I think in that moment he knew that his human friend wasn't going to let the loud noises get him (even though it took a while for him to get out of the closet). He eventually came out though and knew things were OK. So it is for us. In our fears, God comes to us. But he wants to lead us out of the closet too, for God has such big plans for us. So let's trust in our Lord and His messengers, face our fears and be open to the changes God wants us to make, and be not afraid to become the people God knows we can become with a little trust and a little effort working with His plan.