

Sermon Christmas Day 2022

At Christmas, we hear once again the stories surrounding the birth of our Lord. They are familiar to us. We know them like old friends. But they are worth repeating - again and again- because they are so foundational to our faith. In these brief and vivid stories so much is contained, so much is revealed. The importance of repeating an important message is in fact reflected in the Christmas stories themselves. In a few instances a few key words or a few key phrases are repeated, clearly to drive home a message.

In all the accounts of Christmas we have in the New Testament, we hear the angel begin his announcement of Jesus' birth with the words, *'do not be afraid'*. When Gabriel goes to Mary at her house in Nazareth, we are told she was 'much perplexed'. And so she is assured: *'Do not be afraid Mary, for you have found favour with God.'* When Joseph, described as a 'just man', had found his betrothed Mary was expecting a child, he planned to 'dismiss her'. As we know, the child was not his, but not wanting to make things difficult for Mary he resolved to do this 'quietly.' Well, sometimes our plans and good intentions need to be redirected. And so, we are told, *'an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.'*

When Zechariah also encountered an angelic messenger in the temple at Jerusalem as he was going about his priestly duty, we are told, the old man *'was terrified and fear overwhelmed him'*. And again, *'do not be afraid Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard.'* When the shepherds were minding their own business, *'keeping watch over their flocks by night'*, they too 'were terrified.' And to this the angel once more says, *'do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people.'* We do not do the biblical witness much justice when we make such scenes so sentimental and saccharine. How many church and school nativity plays have had the awe and wonder (and indeed terror) stripped away by dressing up cute little children in white sheets with tinsel halos and cut-out wings?

However, in all instances in the gospel stories, their fear gives way. Mary gives birth to the promised Messiah, the very Son of God. Joseph is granted the courage and strength to protect both Mary and the child that is not his. Old Zechariah's prayer is indeed heard, and he becomes the father of the forerunner John the Baptist. The shepherds and all who heard what they told them were 'amazed'.

We are told the shepherds '*glorified and praised God for what they had seen.*' Fear might have been the initial response to the Divine interrupting their lives. And fear *can* be the right response when confronted with something we do not understand. But the message the angel repeats time and again in the telling of Christ's birth - *Do not be afraid* – is simply the assurance that this birth *is* good news. Despite the interruption, despite the strangeness, despite the challenge this news brings, the message is that this is not only good news, it is the best news.

In the sublime poetic reflection on the mystery of the Incarnation told us this morning from the gospel of John, we have heard, *In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.* Fear keeps us in darkness. But the message of Christ's birth is that he is life and he is light and that he overcomes the darkness.

Now, fear *is* a terrible thing. It cripples us into passivity. We might look at current world events and be anxious. The war between Russia and Ukraine being one. Something like 10 million Ukrainians this Christmas will be without electricity, gas or water. We might be further unnerved by China's increasing aggressiveness, or cost of living issues. The currency terrorists deal in is of course the currency of fear. Their acts of unpredictable violence, and the chaos they cause, their chief weapon. It is a campaign strategy of some environmental activists to instill fear - indeed terror – to force a response on the so-called environmental crisis. Our experience under Covid saw all of us live under a cloak of fear. And we have seen people continue to live in a heightened state of anxiety in its aftermath. So much of the narrative – oftentimes very carefully curated by our public officials - was precisely a narrative of fear. But to the degree that fear rules our lives, we should hear the angels' greeting this Christmas: *do not be afraid.* We celebrate light and life, light that overcomes the darkness.

Now, we might fear situations beyond our control, or even a defect or fault within ourselves. But we can also fear God. Indeed, something of this truth is reflected in the biblical stories. Heaven breaks into our world – the light of the divine – and it terrifies! Encountering something of the mystery of God can unnerve us, rattle us, disturb us. These encounters can come unbidden. But they can also come when we start to ask hard questions: *What does my life amount to? What is it all about!? Is this all there is?* Anyone who wishes to take their life seriously must address these questions at some point.

2000 years of lived reflection confirms the Christian conviction that the God revealed in Jesus is ultimately the answer to those big questions. But coming to that conclusion can be a fearful thing. The prospect of God can be terrifying. The writer to the Hebrews reminds, *It is a fearful thing to fall in the hands of the living God*. We sense this to be true. Because if there is a God, and if I accept that to be true, there are consequences. It will mean our lives will have to change. It means we cannot live as if our lives were random, accidental, and without meaning. Accepting the prospect of God – however terrifying and fearful that might be - means we must accept that our lives are purposeful, intentional, ordered toward something. To accept that God is the answer to our deepest questions means we cannot live just for ourselves, that there is a higher and *ultimate* reference point. And this can be terrifying. And so, oftentimes, rather than confront the fear, rather than respond to the challenge, we choose the quiet life, and to ignore the answer to our questions.

But again, to the degree that fear rules our lives, we should hear the angel's greeting this Christmas: *do not be afraid*. And those who have been at the church game for a while need to hear this too. Because we can sometimes keep God at a safe, manageable distance. Because responding fully, wholeheartedly, joyfully to the truth of God and the consequences of belief will unnerve and unsettle us, whether new to all this or long familiar with it. But the angel's simple message is for all. And it is not just a patronizing pat on the head, or seeking to distract us from hard realities. We need not fear precisely because of what we celebrate today. We need not fear because in Christ we see the kind of God we are dealing with. In Christ, we are shown what God is like. *That* is the joyous mystery, the sublime wonder, of what we are celebrating here. The God who answers all our deepest longings and addresses all our earnest questions is the God laying in the manger! And who can fear such a thing?!

Saint Paul tells us that *love drives out all fear*. That is *who* we celebrate this Christmas: Love taken human form in Jesus Christ. *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it*. Light, life and love Incarnated – enfleshed – in that little child. We need not be afraid because in Jesus we discover the God who is trustworthy and true. We need not be afraid, because we look to the One whose life, death and resurrection shows us the way out of all our fears. This Christmas we repeat once more the stories, and songs and family traditions. As we do, let us be sure of the message: today is born the Light that overcomes all darkness. Amen.