

## Fear Not! Christmas 2021

One of the challenges of preaching from the texts we have just heard is that they are so familiar. Many of us have heard the account of the birth of Jesus dozens or even dozens of dozens of times in our lifetime. We have heard the Christmas story so many times that we probably don't think too much about it. We have heard that mysterious and wondrous story over and over, sung countless Christmas carols about it, and watched numerous plays and pageants that may or may not be in harmony with the biblical accounts. Like other things that can become routine, it is easy to overlook the wonder that surrounds us during this most special time of the year.

When we do things the same way over and over, our mind often ceases to question the activity, and instead directs the rest of our body to just do it. Now that might be OK when it comes to brushing our teeth or mowing the grass, but if we allow our minds to process God's Word in that fashion, we will not hear God speaking to us. My fear is that we have become so familiar with the story of Christmas that we are no longer amazed by the mystery of it all and we will overlook the significance of the manner in which Christ came to earth for the first time. The shepherds mentioned in Luke's gospel certainly didn't have that problem.

***And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.***

As I looked through all of the beautiful cards that Tami and I received this Christmas season, I couldn't find any that accurately depicted that scene. I found pictures of snowmen, Santa Claus, reindeer, Christmas trees and poinsettias. There were pictures of snow-covered churches, Christmas candles and snowflakes. Some even had verses of Scripture on them, but there were none showing the shepherds quaking in their boots. There was one card that had an image of an angel, but it was nothing like the angel and army of angels that Luke mentions in verses 9 and 13.

Judging by the shepherd's reaction that night in Bethlehem, you would think that the angel was bringing them tidings of bad news rather than good news. Even so, their fearful response was quite typical. Throughout the Scriptures, we find that angels are not the benign creatures we often see portrayed in children's Christmas pageants. Angels are holy messengers of God, and they are one of the most powerful means of God revealing Himself to us. The angel Gabriel was an especially fearsome being. His first known earthly appearance was to the OT prophet Daniel. God sent the angel to the prophet to help him understand a mysterious vision he had seen. 8:16-18. Five hundred years later, Zechariah had a similar response when Gabriel appeared to tell him of the coming birth of his son John the Baptist (Luke 1:12). Likewise, Mary was afraid when Gabriel appeared and told her she would give birth to Jesus (Luke 1:29).

Perhaps our reaction would have been the same. Imagine that you are answering the phone at the office, or teaching a class, studying for a test, fixing an automobile, tending to an ailing patient, running the vacuum cleaner, or cooking dinner when suddenly an angel appears. However this angel doesn't look like the one we have seen on our Christmas cards or on the TV show "Touched by an Angel". This angel is fearsome and at the same time holy, surrounded by a blinding light and a thunderous noise that forces everything in its presence to tremble and fall to the ground. Even the most devout Christian might initially sense at least a little bit of fear. What would go through your mind? Hopefully it is not "I wish I would have remembered to read my Bible and pray this morning." It seems there is little doubt that we are living in a time when people fear everything but the Lord.

We can't blame Him, because God sent angels to tell the shepherds and the world that this was not just another birth in Bethlehem. **2:10-11** This was no ordinary birth and no ordinary baby but the birth of a Savior- our Savior, the One who has come into the world to rescue and redeem fallen humanity. Knowing that humanity could not comprehend a God that was distant and invisible, He came to earth in the form of a human being, born from His mother's womb like you and I. Jesus came to reconcile us to our God and Creator, **He came to make things right between us and God, He came to fix our broken relationship with our creator.** Loved by some and reviled by others, He came to fulfill God's divine plan for the redemption of His people and His creation.

The paradox is that the good news of great joy also comes with great tears of sorrow. We celebrate His birth tonight, all the while knowing that He came to earth in Bethlehem so that He might die on Good Friday for our sins. We celebrate His birth tonight knowing His love for us and our faith in Him overcomes the evil enemies of fear and doubt. The good news of great joy is that we no longer need fear death, and someday that enemy we know as sadness will also fall. Until then, we trust in His grace and mercy and find peace in the promises of Scripture. We see a glimpse of His glory now, but the day will come when every creature will see it in its fullness. **Isaiah 40:5** The Good News is that we need not be fearful of it. The love of Christ is always with us, and those candles on the altar, the Advent wreath, and the ones we will soon hold in our hands all serve to remind us that evil and darkness are no match for the goodness and glory of God.

My prayer this evening is that will do more than just acknowledge that Jesus truly loves us and go a step further and let that love motivate us to live our lives for Him. As we journey from this earthly life to life eternal, let us never forget that the Christmas story does not end tonight. There are several more chapters to go. Some we have read many times before, like Good Friday and Resurrection Sunday. But there are some parts that God has yet to fully release, like the return of His Son the Christ, the final judgment, and the eternal kingdom. Gabriel's work is not finished, and perhaps he will soon reveal some additional details. But fear not, because he will bring more good news of great joy. Fear not, Jesus is coming back. Until then, may God grant us mercy and grace to remain faithful and true. Amen