

The angels kept saying, “Be Not Afraid.”

- Merry Christmas you all! Merry Christmas!
- And... be not afraid. Be not afraid
- This year, I took some time and I read each of the birth stories from all three gospels
- Each of them with their own special focus, and what really jumped out at me this year- and it is not the first time- but this year in particular
- Was the angels kept saying to everyone they met, Be Not Afraid.
- As I read these accounts of Jesus’ birth, I realize they really did have a lot to fear: Mary, Joseph the Shepherds
- And they each overcame so much
- And it was in imagining their world that I realized our world was not too different today... be not afraid.
- It seems that there is always plenty in our world to fear, isn’t there?
- It’s all the things- wars, rumors of wars, political instability, the next election- and it doesn’t even matter which election, it’s all of them
- And still the persistent background rumblings of viruses and economic decline
- And the real parts of being human- health and sickness, death and life
- And I will also tell you, I had a moment this week where I had quite a bit of fear around this service today
- Not only did the copy machine decide this week is the best week to malfunction- which I suspect was just a way to get attention
- But the forecast earlier in the week was just terrible- lots and lots of snow
- And I feared, not only for a potential loss of power, frustrated travels, and ruined Christmas plans
- We all fear at times, don’t we?
- Fear usually presents us with the three options: flight, fight, or freeze
- And while they are all valid self-protection mechanisms, none of them offer any growth
- None of them offer transformation, or new perspectives, or even better understanding of our selves
- But tonight is all about what might be, what could be, what will be with God and God’s work in us and in this world
- Tonight is all about radical change, growth, and transformation

- Tonight is all about NOT being afraid
- Because tonight... tonight God is born to us, God is with us, Jesus has arrived to be with us, Emanuel
- Tonight God is making new things possible again, and we don't have to fear it
- It happens at least three times during these birth stories, where an angel appears and says this magic words:
  - "Be not afraid"
  - Last week, it was Advent 4, and we read of Matthew's account of Joseph's encounter with an angel
    - Just as an aside, I find it little strange that our lectionary is organized in this fashion
    - It spreads the different perspectives out over a three year period in Advent: Joseph, Mary, and then Mary with Elizabeth
    - But no one year gets all of the perspectives!
  - This year was Joseph's year
  - Joseph encountered an angel in a dream, and the angel began by saying, Joseph, do not be afraid.
  - In this case, it was to not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, and to raise this child as your own
  - As a dad myself, I often connect to Joseph's part in the birth of Jesus, not to in anyway take away from Mary's role
  - Joseph had to have been afraid! And worried.
  - In a moment, Joseph became both a new husband and a new father, and under very odd circumstances
  - If the angel was right, then you take the regular fear a new father experiences and just go ahead and multiply it by 10
  - Will I be a good father? Will I be a good enough father for the Messiah?
    - How am I going to pay for this?
  - All of those fear impulses would have been there, and the angel said, do not be afraid, Joseph
  - We actually do not know much more about Joseph: we know he left into action to take his new family to Egypt and keep them safe
  - And that one time when he and Mary lost Jesus in the temple... of course that story gets recorded for all time!
  - Some suspect he died early, having given all he had to this new family, to being a step-father to Jesus in a way
  - I wonder what parts of his experience were omitted by our scripture- if Mary sang the Magnificat, what song did Joseph sing when he overcame his fear?

- How was he transformed by God and in God's presence through his firstborn son?
- Then tonight, from Luke's gospel, the angels appear to the Shepherds
  - And again, in all their magnificence, tell them not to be afraid
  - I do wonder what exactly is so scary about angels- is it what they represent?
  - Or Is it the surprise of their arrival?
  - Maybe angels are very weird and scary looking!
  - Or is it that the message they bring most assuredly means that these shepherd's world is about to be turned upside down.
  - First it was one angel, and that was scary enough
  - Then a whole host of angels, singing
  - Shepherds were not the kind of people you would typically invite over for dinner
  - They were dirty, shady people who were often seen as people who would steal from you if given the chance
  - Yet to them the angels appeared, and it was they who first visited the manger
  - The shepherds overcame their fear, did not freeze or flee or fight...
  - They went, and then returned, Luke says, glorifying and praising God
  - Their lives would never go back to how it was before.
- And then we have Mary,
  - Our lectionary may not focus on her until next year, but I will not make that mistake today
  - Because while the Shepherds certainly had their moment with the angels
    - And their moment before God incarnate
  - And Joseph overcame his fear, and embraced his role in being an earthy father to Jesus, and all that came with that
  - Mary carried Jesus, carried this God Child in her womb for 9 months before any of this happened
  - When that angel appeared to Mary, I know she had to have been afraid initially, right?
  - When the angel first appeared to Mary, he said, "greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you. "
  - And then, I believe after observing Mary's reaction, said, "Do not be afraid."
  - But her faith was strong, she sang her Magnificat, and she followed God's will for her life no matter how scary it was
  - Mary was transformed into the "Theo-tokos", the God bearer

- I marvel at the whole process of bringing new life into this world, there is so much about pregnancy that I only get to witness
- I remember when Katy was pregnant realizing that there were things going on between her and the baby that I would never experience
- Sharing the same blood, the same immune system, co-existing, feeling the movement, the heartbeat
- Mary experienced God in that most intimate way.
- It reminds me of that song, “Mary did you know?”- do you know it?
- I don’t know what it is lately, but I have seen so many people posting negative things about that song
  - They keep saying, "of course she knew, and this is stupid, whatever”
  - I’m here to set the record straight- the song is a great song.
  - Ok, I’m glad we got that settled and out of the way
  - I say, any song that invites us to enter the story, and marvel at Mary’s faith and willing heart, is a good one
- The Gospel of Luke says, immediately after the Shepherds visit and told them about the angels, that Mary,
  - “treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.”
  - And we can ponder them with her.
- Sure, Mary knew Jesus was special, was from God
- Yet surely no one could know all of what was to come, or how all of them would be changed by being in his presence
- While Mary was certainly ahead of the curve in this revelation, surely she too held fast to her faith in the midst of the mystery of God’s incarnation
- And if she was afraid, she did not let it stop her
- She was bringing into the world the very God incarnate, God in the flesh
- And the angel said, be not afraid
  - Can we imagine tonight God sending an angel to tell us this very thing today?
  - Like the shepherds, like Joseph, and like Mary, we too can experience God in the flesh
  - And if we allow it, if we let it in, if we ponder with Mary what it means for even us to be God Bearers today
  - It can be really overwhelming to think about it like that, and can create some fear and response
  - It is tempting, then, to avoid that all together
  - If we are not careful, these familiar stories of Jesus’ birth can lull us into a comfortable place instead of one of radical revelation<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Rt. Rev. Larry Benfield, <https://www.episcopalarkansas.org/news/a-christmas-break-in>

- They can work like a lullaby, like the hymn silent night sung slowly and reverently
- And we get that little warm feeling, that happy feeling, and we close our eyes content
- But the coming of the Incarnate God is not like that at all, it should be a little overwhelming,
- In fact it should be a little scary
- I heard one preacher say that the coming of God is more like a break-in than a lullaby
- Jesus is breaking in right now!
- Break-ins do not lull us to sleep, but jolt us awake
- Our heart rate increases, adrenaline pumps, and we are more aware of what is happening in and around us
- We may even have our fight, flight, freeze responses tempt us
- But the angel's message is for us too- do not be afraid
- Instead, following these examples we have found tonight, be open to what God may be doing in you
- I would even say that our task is to overcome our fear and to be like shepherds,
  - to be witnesses to God's breaking in to this world, and to go away praising God
- It is our task to follow in Joseph's holy example
  - And become caretakers of God's breaking in to the world
- To follow Mary's faithful example and become God bearer's in the world
  - Modern day theo-tokos.
  - Carrying Jesus, the Christ child, with us and in us wherever we go
  - Giving birth to God's love and word made flesh.
- The Christmas miracle is that God is still being born today, still breaking in, still taking us by surprise
- And still calling us to overcome our fear and to be transformed
- And to help transform a hurting, fearful world into something more like God's kingdom full love, justice, and peace
- May God be born to you this day. And as the angel said, Be not afraid.

Amen.