

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ. “Do not be afraid.” Those are the first words spoken in that familiar Christmas story from Luke chapter 2 that we just heard read. “Do not be afraid.” It’s what the angel says to the shepherds when it appears to them on the night watch. This is such a well-known and well-loved story for many of us, evoking memories of Christmases past and connecting us to our own experiences with newborn babies, that we might easily move past this detail. And we probably aren’t likely either to give much thought to who these shepherds are, or why they were the ones the angels brought these “good news of great joy.” We don’t have a lot of experience with shepherds, most of us – although Grace folks have heard me tell the stories of my grandfather and his little flock of six sheep that he had when I was a child. But that is a story for another time. And anyway, he wasn’t really what you’d call a shepherd, and the sheep went into the barn at the end of the day, so there was no watching them by night. The shepherds in this story lived a very different reality than we are familiar with. And they had a lot to be afraid of, day in and day out, night in and night out. One source of fear for them was predators. Wolves, for instance, and sometimes lions or bears. And sheep are not the easiest animals to protect. They have no natural defenses. They are easily panicked. And they tend to wander away from the flock, especially at night. And then there were the human predators. Sheep, you see, were valuable commodities, which made them targets for thieves and bandits. And of course, night was the time for theft. So, shepherds had to stay awake, work together, and carry weapons: club, slings, or knives. And if they failed to protect the sheep from any of these threats there was still more to fear. Because they didn’t own the sheep they were tending. Losing a sheep could lose them their wages, or put them in debt to their employer. And if something did go wrong, even if it wasn’t their fault, they had little recourse, because they were typically landless, hired laborers on the margins of society, regarded with suspicion by the more respectable classes, and sometimes for good reasons. Shepherds were known for trespassing and grazing their flocks on other peoples’ land. The point is, for whatever reason, fear would have been an ever-present reality, a fact of life for shepherds in this time and place.

Now, on top of all this, they find themselves confronted by an angel of the Lord and strangely surrounded by light, the “glory of the Lord.” And while you and I might imagine we’d quite like to be face-to-face with an angel, especially if it’s one of those chubby little winged babies, or a comforting, Italian baroque sort of angel like the one we just put on the front of our crèche, these images that we so readily conjure would have been completely foreign to the people in this story. Biblical angels are much more ominous. They signal God’s holiness, God’s power, and God’s judgment. And that is why the shepherds are now not just run-of-the-mill fearful, they are downright terrified. They know something is about to go down. And they know that when things *do* go down, they are the kind of people who tend to suffer disproportionately.

Now we have the context we need to appreciate the turn our story takes. “Do not be afraid,” says the angel. Things are going down, but not in the way the shepherds expect. The message the angel brings is not the kind of bad news they are so used to. The angel news for them is actually *good*. And it is good for *them*. God is finally delivering on the long-promised savior for God’s people. Tonight he is born, and this savior, this Messiah, has come to save *all* of God’s people, shepherds included. Then suddenly there is a whole army of angels backing up the angel messenger. But instead of a war cry, they sing out a song of peace, reinforcing the first angel’s message that God has come not to destroy but to rescue and reconcile. And as suddenly as they appeared, they are gone, back into heaven. And everything is as it was before. Except that it isn’t. “Did you see what I

just saw?” You can imagine them asking each other that, can’t you? And when it becomes clear that what they thought happened actually had happened, they decide to follow up on the sign they were given, the swaddled newborn, in a manger, of all places. So they go and somehow find the baby. Maybe they heard him crying. Maybe it wasn’t such a silent night. You know that unmistakable cry that newborns have? Anyway, there’s nothing in the Bible about the baby being silent, so we can imagine he cried just like any baby. And, as Martin Luther insisted, we can also be confident that he filled his diaper, because he was a real baby who did real baby things.

However they managed it, the shepherds found the promised baby, just as they had been told. And then *they* told everyone who would listen what had happened to them out in the fields. How could they not? And those who heard it were amazed, just as the shepherds had been amazed at their encounter with the angels, after they got over being terrified. And that’s because the shepherds, too, were being angels, messengers of God’s promise that wasn’t only for them. They weren’t told to share that promise, but I expect the angel knew they couldn’t be silent once they found the sign to be true.

It is what happens next, at the end of this story that is perhaps most important for us gathered here tonight, now two thousand years in the future. The shepherds returned. They went back into the night, back to their fields, back to tending the sheep in their charge. They returned to face the same threats they had always faced – the predators, the thieves and bandits, the skittish, helpless sheep, and their difficult relationship with their employers. But now they faced their fearful circumstances confident that God cared about them, and was in the process of making things right for them and for all people. Now, I am quite certain that they had no idea what was coming for that newborn baby in the manger, how he would bring healing and hope to the people he encountered, how he would go through death and hell to disarm the powers of sin, death, and evil, or how he would rise from death to open the way to authentic and abundant life for them and all people. All that was yet to be accomplished. For the moment, nothing had changed. And yet, at the same time, *everything* had changed. Their trust in God’s promise to them made all the difference. And so just like the angels, they also couldn’t help but praise God for all that they had seen and heard.

All of us gathered here this evening, like the shepherds, are beset in our daily lives by fears of one sort or another, fears that sometimes keep us up at night, fears that gnaw at us and wear us down. And there is indeed much to fear in the world as it is. So, I’m not going to send you away tonight with a message of “don’t worry, be happy.” That was not the angel’s message to the shepherds. The angel did not say, “don’t worry about those wolves lurking out there just out of the range of your slings... don’t worry about the bandits who will try to ambush you, or your bosses wrath when trouble strikes.” The angel’s message was rather that God has come among us as one of us in the Bethlehem manger, has joined God’s self to your fearful reality, and is with you in everything you face. But that’s not all. God is not only with you, but also for you, still at work in the world in the risen Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, to save you and God’s beloved world from the lingering grip of sin, death, and evil, and at the last to make all things new. So what I am sending you away with tonight is God’s promise of peace and life in Jesus Christ. That’s really all I’ve got. But when by the grace of God and the work of the Holy Spirit you find yourself trusting that promise, you will find, like the shepherds, that it is enough. You will find that though nothing has changed, yet *everything* has changed, and you can now face the fearful world with hope, without fear of what the future will ultimately bring, and with determination to be God’s agent of peace and hope for everyone you encounter. May it be so. And may the peace of the newborn Christ, the peace that passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.