

## Don't Be Afraid

Luke 2:1-20

Cradock Presbyterian Church

December 24, 2012

When you're a kid, Parents are always telling you "Don't be afraid." I heard it from my parents all the time, especially from my Dad. "Oh, that little ol' snake? Don't afraid of *that* thing! Hey – where'd Don go?" Sorry, Dad – "Don't be afraid" never gonna work! It's hilarious sometimes to watch kids going to see Santa Claus for the first time. Their parents go to put 'em on Santa's lap, and they just *freak*. You can hear 'em screaming all over the mall! "Hey! Don't be afraid – that's Santa! He just wants to know what presents you want!" This church must be a pretty warm and welcoming place – we didn't have any of that this year when we had the kids in for lunch with Santa. Must have been because Santa was so good to the kids.

Do you remember the time when there was a really bad storm and the lights went out, and it was *dark, really* dark? "Don't be afraid – they'll have the lights on in no time." I remember one of those times, though, when I *didn't* hear the folks say "Don't be afraid." I even remember the date – January 24, 1967. You can look it up – I did, to make sure I had the date right. We were living in St. Louis then. It had been really, really *warm*, an unusual kind of warm, mid-70s that time of year for more than a week. That night, a cold front moved in; the storms that came with it generated an F-4 tornado that passed within a quarter-mile of where we were living. The thing was so scary that for once, my parents weren't saying, "Don't be afraid" – because they were scared out of their minds, too.

You know why? Because this was something completely new. This was an experience they'd never had before, never dreamed could happen, never thought could be so scary. Oh sure, they *knew* about tornadoes, and how the earth would tremble, and you'd hear a roar like jets and trains. And how windows might blow out from the pressure drop – which happened in the apartment right across from us. They knew about all this. It's something else to have it unfold all around you!

When God decides to do something completely new, something spectacular and powerful, it's like that kind of fear – you can't help but be afraid. When God or an angel appears to anybody, and that includes us, you're gonna be afraid. Imagine people in those pre-scientific, superstitious days of Jesus, and it's easy to see how fearful they would be. Zechariah was afraid when the angel appeared to him, to tell him of John's birth. Mary was at least startled when she got her angel appearance, to tell her she would be the mother of Jesus. But they each got ONE angel. How do you think those shepherds must have felt, with *the heavenly hosts* lighting up the skies and bursting into song? That's some serious surround sound right there! They could have run and hid, but then God's plan wouldn't have unfolded as planned, and of course *that* couldn't be. So to prevent that, there was one angel to speak to them first. "Don't be afraid," he said. But then he said something that might have made them very afraid. "I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." Hang on a minute, holy guy! You just changed our entire world!

And if there's one thing we all fear, throughout human history, it's change. The bigger the change, the more afraid we are. The shepherds probably realized that if this newborn baby was indeed the Messiah, there were going to be changes like never before. That would make anybody afraid. You have to wonder what kind of images were going through their minds as they went. Would the baby be, like, *glowing* with heavenly energy as he lay there? Would he be issuing orders already? Would he already be rendering judgments? – since that's one of the things the Messiah was supposed to do.

The angel went on, as if to continue dispelling fear. "This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." Well, now, they must have thought, what the hey, that's what we do with our babies. He's a regular baby? How is he the Messiah, then?" I bet they were confused. How can this baby be the one to redeem Israel if you gotta wrap him up like any other baby?

Cue the "proof squad," a.k.a. the "heavenly host." As if to prove this baby was the real deal, suddenly the heavens are filled with angels, and the most glorious surround sound you ever heard. And what are they singing? "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" If the shepherds had doubts about this so-called Messiah's legitimacy, they were erased now. It had to have been quite a spectacle! And just like that, it was over.

You know it had a profound effect on them, because we read that the shepherds went to see "this thing that has happened" *immediately*. No worries

about how low their status was, or whether they'd be welcomed, none of that. If God had wanted them to see all of this bad enough that he sent scads of angels, there *must* be a purpose. And if the sign to them was that the baby would be like one of their own babies – well, that must be an invitation! Any fears they had about how much their world had changed were, it appears, washed away in the joy, the power and the inspiration they had received from God.

You get a sense of that from the way Matthew tells us the women left the tomb that first Easter morning. After the angel had told them Jesus had arisen, they left with both fear *and* great joy. You understand the great joy; I think the fear is to be expected. It's fear because their world has changed unbelievably, and, what does it all mean? Jesus even has to tell them, "Do not be afraid," and I don't think it's about being afraid of him. Those shepherds, I'm telling you, were in fear as they went to Bethlehem that day. But then they went, and saw.

And what did they see? They saw a baby like their own babies. They saw bands of cloth, just like they wrapped their own babies in. And they saw that baby lying in a manger – a most decidedly non-elite, unwealthy place for a baby to be. He's one of us! He's not a kingly, over-our-heads Messiah.

And that's why you and I don't need to be afraid tonight. You and I live in a world that doubts *everything*. Anything good to come our way we examine carefully, 'cause it might be a trick; if it's spectacularly good, we get all the more suspicious. "Too good to be true" is just *ingrained* into our being. And yet, here we have it, the account that tells us God made it happen this way intentionally, so

that you and I and people like us and people unlike us and just plain people anywhere – could realize that this baby Messiah had been born *for them*. That means that his ministry, and his death on the cross, and his resurrection, and his promises of eternal life for all who believe, were for them and for everybody, too.

As I stand here tonight, on this most blessed and holy night, I can't help but wonder if the reason so many people do not know our Lord Jesus, and have not accepted his free gift of salvation, is because they think "it's too good to be true," or maybe because they're just plain afraid. Those of you who came to the special Sunday School we had yesterday now know how thoroughly God made sure that the message was clear. This Messiah was born into the world of the common people, because he was *for* the common folks. And yet, he *was* – and still *is* – a king, so he came for royalty, too. You know that's true, because in a few days we celebrate Epiphany, when three kings came to pay him homage, which kings only do to other kings. In other words, he came for everyone. So how come everyone hasn't come to him? Could it be fear of change? If we can make people see that Jesus Christ did come for everyone, and I think maybe for lots of folks we already have, then maybe, just maybe, we can chase away their fear.

I think it does come down to fear even today, that good ol' fear of change. When people consider what becoming a disciple of our Lord Jesus means for their life, they know it means change – and that scares them to death. They're like the shepherds, contemplating what the angel has just told them about a Messiah who has finally come, and being very afraid. This is where we can bring

a special gift to the manger of our infant king. You and I have a job to do, and that job is our gift. We need to model for the world how good it is to be those disciples of Jesus Christ, how powerful it is to know you've received his gift of eternal life, and how wonderful it is to live life with his Holy Spirit right alongside. In the same way that the shepherds were reassured by the sign the angel gave them – that the baby Messiah was a baby just like their own babies – so we need to give people signs to help them understand: Jesus Christ came *for you*. I am convinced that once people understand that our Lord came *for them*, that he has this gift of life *for them*, and that their life will be way better *because of him*, they might just lose their fear, turn, and be saved.

Does that make you afraid, to hear that? Because it means change in your own life, probably, if you go down *that* road! That's okay! Just as the shepherds, when they had gone to the place where Jesus was, came away praising God, completely unafraid because of all they had seen, so you too will see all you need to see to chase away your fear. That's the way God works with us in this life. And because God is working with us, we can not only be unafraid, we can be confident as we do God's work. We can be confident as we share the Good news. We can be confident about our lives. For that, you can give all praise and thanks this night, to the God born in a manger, who we don't ever need to fear. .