



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

Christmas Eve: December 24, 2019

Sermon Title: "Do not be afraid."

Gospel Text: Luke 2:1-20

"Do not be afraid." Those were the first words the angel spoke. What a contrast – an angel standing there boldly, illuminated – glowing even – with the glory of the Lord, while the shepherds were huddled in fear, their bodies as coarse and rough as their clothing. Angels and shepherds together made the most unlikely of conversation partners as they stood at the very hinge of history.

"Do not be afraid." When I was a boy, those words sounded so out of place at Christmas. What possibly could be frightening on Christmas Eve? I suppose that reaction was predictable. As a little boy I was blessed to grow up in quite a wonderful little bubble up on the hilltop in McKean County, Pennsylvania in a little town called Kane. I felt no fear as a boy in Kane. Year-round it was a wonderful place to grow up. But Christmas was the very best. In my mind's eye I can still see the snowy sidewalks of Fraley Street and the shops brightly lit at night. Even the street lights were decorated for the season. I'll never forget all the toys at McCrory's, and the endless rows of magazines at Archer's newsstand.

But for me, the very best part of Christmas was the Sears Wish Book. In a time long before cell phones, the Internet, and hundreds of cable TV channels, the Wish Book was our constant childhood companion. It quickly became worn and dog-eared as my brother and I endlessly leafed through the pages and pages of toys and carefully wrote our Christmas wish lists.

On Christmas Eve my mother and grandparents would spend the whole morning and afternoon cooking a very traditional Swedish meal with korv, lutefisk, Swedish brown beans, and rye bread, with recipes straight from the Old Country. After the meal ended and the dishes were washed, we children waited with minimal patience while our grandparents opened their presents. Finally, we were permitted to bolt down the street to our home and joyfully open our presents, before trudging off for the final candlelight Christmas service at Tabor Lutheran. It was straight out of a Normal Rockwell painting. I never could've imagined there was *any* reason for *anybody* to be afraid, especially at Christmas time.

All these years later, I realize how naïve I was. During my childhood *of course* there were plenty of reasons for people to be afraid. And certainly I realize now why a motley band of shepherds would feel terror at the sight of a glowing angel. Throughout Luke's Gospel, God sends messengers to tell the people to not be afraid. When an angel told Zechariah that he and Elizabeth will become parents to John the Baptist, the angel said, "Do not be afraid." When an

angel announced to Mary that she will give birth to Jesus, the angel said, “Do not be afraid.” And when Jesus called Simon Peter to be a disciple, Jesus said, “Do not be afraid.”

We are gathered here tonight with our own collection of fears. We feel fear because of declining health. We feel fear because of economic uncertainties. We feel fear because we live in such polarized, divided times. We feel fear because we are lonely. We feel fear because it seems like we’ve lost control. And we feel fear because we’re convinced that our future will never be as safe and secure as what we think the past once was.

Fear is a powerful thing. It can freeze us in place and paralyze us from pursuing the future God has in mind for us. It turns us inward and destroys our self-worth. Fear isolates us from one another, wounds our friendships and communities, and attempts to alienate us from God. And so at this stage in my life I cannot think of a more suitable message on Christmas Eve than the one the angels delivered that night in Bethlehem to the shepherds. “Do not be afraid.”

As we read elsewhere in the New Testament, the only thing that can drive out fear is “perfect love.”¹ And perfect love is just what the angel came to announce – in the form of the long-promised Messiah, the Son of God. He, Jesus, is the Good News and great joy God has sent to defeat and banish our fears. Jesus came to save not only the shepherds of Bethlehem or the people of Israel but *all of creation*, including you and me. And so in the midst of all the fears we carry this night, Jesus says “Do not be afraid.” He invites us to drop our fears in his manger, so that we aren’t consumed *by* them, but instead filled with his body and blood, forgiven of our sins, healed from our fears, and lifted upwards to live life in joy. *Do not be afraid*; for we have heard good news of great joy for all the people, for in the city of David a Savior was born, who is the Messiah, our Lord.

But what does it mean to live in the light of Jesus Christ without fear? Well, even as followers of Jesus it doesn’t mean that our lives will be perfect. Traffic here in State College will still frustrate us. Donuts still won’t be calorie free. Our favorite sports teams will still sometimes lose. People will continue to get ill, relationships will still fracture, and we and our loved ones will still sometimes experience suffering and pain.

None of this should be a surprise though. As our Gospel reminds us, there in Bethlehem that first Christmas night, in the presence of Joseph, a good and righteous man from Nazareth, that fragile, vulnerable little baby – God enfleshed – was lovingly wrapped in cloth and placed in a stone feeding trough to rest. Roughly 33 years later, not far from Bethlehem, that baby – now a man – would be lovingly wrapped in cloths once again, in the presence of a different Joseph, a good and righteous man from Arimathea, and laid to rest in a stone tomb, for what everyone thought would be his eternal rest. In the shadow of a brutal cross, it would seem, for three days at least, that fear had won the final victory.

But on Easter Sunday, Jesus’s followers would discover to their amazement that the tomb was empty. Jesus defeated sin, death, and the devil, and his perfect love cast out all fear. The victory has been won, even if the fruits of that victory have not yet been fully realized in our lives. And so if our lives aren’t perfect, perhaps in the light of Christ’s perfect love we can at least view our lives with greater clarity and perspective. So friends, do not be afraid. We’ve

been blessed with Good News. *Jesus loves you*, and there's nothing in heaven or on earth can separate you from that love. *Jesus loves you*, and so you are freed from your sins and the burden of saving yourself. *Jesus loves you*, and so you are liberated from the rat race of trying to form yourself into someone you are not, and instead can rest in the grace of a Savior who delights in your mere being.

This Good News in Jesus Christ has the power to transform the way we see our lives and our neighbors. It even has the power to soothe hearts aching with the loss of loved ones, because Jesus's love will one day draw us all together again, reunited across time and eternity around his table. When Jesus can deny the last word even to that most relentless of foes, death itself, we can be assured that we need not fear anymore.

As I look back on my boyhood Christmases in Kane, I can now admit that maybe things weren't quite as magical or perfect as my child's eyes might have led me to believe. And yet there's a big part of that experience that I want to recapture for myself, and for you. Because too often we allow our cynicism, pessimism, and world-weariness to blind us to the miracles God is blooming all around us, if we but look. If the Savior of the World can come to us as a mere *baby*, imagine what other miracles and blessings our Lord has in store for us. *So be not afraid*. Like the shepherds, embrace the Good News of Jesus with *joy*. Merry Christmas everyone. Amen.

Citations:

¹ 1 John 4:18