

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

December 24, 2024

“But what if there's reason to fear?”

[Readings](#)

[Bulletin](#)

Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

I don't know about you, but I've had a hard time getting into the “Christmas spirit” this year. There are all sorts of reasons behind this difficulty. Our family has had a lot of sickness in the last few months, that doesn't help. We're in the midst of a lot of transition, figuring out new routines and structures. There's an awful lot of violence in the world today too. Not to mention, poverty, disease, injustice, racism, all sorts of -phobias and prejudices, cruelty, selfishness, and on and on and on the litany of suffering can go...

I guess I've been feeling pretty fearful lately. Uncertain and anxious about the future too. Any of that resonate with any of you? I bet these feelings would resonate with those shepherds out in the fields around Bethlehem too. Let's look a little closer at them.

Our reading opens with important imperial news, all the world is to be registered. That means shepherds too, by the way. Joseph and Mary travel to Bethlehem and have the baby Jesus. Then the scene switches with these words, “Now in that same region there were shepherds living in the fields...”

Had those shepherds already been registered? Were they waiting? Or were they unable to be registered as it would take them away from their essential duties? What might the consequences have been, I wonder, for those who failed to be registered? Their political position seems precarious at best, and Luke states plainly that these shepherds live out in the wilderness with their flocks. Part of the reason for that is to protect their animals from predators and difficult terrain.

So these shepherds have plenty of reasons to be skittish! And into their anxious reality breaks the divine reality. A reality that regularly overwhelms us mortals. Angels appear, heavenly messengers that reflect but a small fraction of God's glory. And the shepherds were "terrified" verse 9 tells us. No wonder!

How about Mary and Joseph? The text doesn't explicitly say that they were afraid the way it tells us the shepherds were, but imagine yourself in their shoes! Young, about to be first-time parents, traveling a fair distance given the times. Taking this trip because of the threat of Imperial violence and knowing that its main purpose is so they can be taxed more by Rome. The trip must have drained their resources a fair amount, and they're likely not very wealthy to bring with. When they finally arrive in Bethlehem there's no room for them! Add on the fear and uncertainty of childbirth to top it all off. Into all of that comes shepherds sharing crazy tidings of angel choirs. In Mary and Joseph's shoes I imagine I'd have some trepidation too!

There's fear all over the place in the Christmas story. Violence and suffering too. We won't read it this year, since it's found in Matthew's account and we're focused on Luke, but please remember that the Christmas story also includes Herod's slaughter of the Innocents and the Holy Family fleeing persecution as asylum-seekers into Egypt. Again and again in the story of the Incarnation we are reminded of the brokenness of human reality. The myriad ways we fail to live as God created us to live. And it is into that broken reality that the Word is born.

Thanks be to God for that! You see, that's the key to dealing with fear. Seeing the Word. It's exactly what the angel tells the shepherds: "Do not be afraid, for see [notice], I am bringing you good news [Word] of great joy for all the people..."¹ The angel's antidote for the shepherd's fear is for them to notice the Word in the world around them.

It is the same root assurance the angel Gabriel gives Mary in the midst of her fear: "The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son,

¹ Luke 2:10b (NRSVUE) parentheses mine

and you will name him Jesus.”² Mary’s encounter with the Word will be particularly close...she will bear the Word into the world. She will bear the antidote to fear, her’s and others’, into the world.

Are you afraid of something right now? What anxieties are gripping you? What thoughts keep you up at night? Is the state of the world bearing you down? Is the weight of the world’s suffering and pain crushing your joy? Let me offer you something of an antidote: look for where the Word is at work in the world. Try to notice what God is up to in your life.

From my own experience, I can’t promise this will always work. We’re not naturally inclined to looking for God, which can make it hard for us to practice this spiritual discipline. But I can promise that if you do start to cultivate a practice of noticing the Word, looking for God; you will absolutely see the in-breaking of God’s Kingdom in the world around you.

The Word is working in the groups of carolers offering sung cheer to others. The Word is working in holding open a door for someone...doing the dishes...offering a sympathetic ear...delivering goodies...sharing a ride to church. The Word is also working in the EMT administering CPR, the soup kitchen feeding desperate people. The Word is at work in the mines of Congo, and in the rubble of Gaza. The Word is with amputees in Ukraine and starving people around the world. Word is at work in those places and the Word is calling us to those places too. To join in the fear-defying work that’s needed there.

There was a meme going around a couple of years back that described hope. But I think it also accurately describes the Holy Spirit. And it certainly describes the Word at work in our world, working towards justice and peace, abundance and equality; working toward the in-breaking of God’s Kingdom: “People speak of hope as if it is this delicate, ephemeral thing made of whispers and spider’s webs. It’s not. Hope has dirt on her face, blood on her knuckles, the grit of the cobblestones in her hair, and just spat out a tooth as she rises for another go.”³

² Luke 1:30-31 (NRSVUE)

³ Matthew [@CrowsFault]. “People speak of hope...” Twitter, 10 March 2022, <https://x.com/CrowsFault/status/1502001835779014666>

The Spirit, God's Word Incarnate, is relentless. And it is relentless in pursuing God's Kingdom, in working to bring about God's intentions for Creation. Intentions that the Christmas story make clear: life despite barrenness, joy and gladness, salvation and peace.

Then there is the Word present in the songs of Christmas! And I don't mean Christmas hymns. Rather I mean Zechariah's *Benedictus* and Elizabeth's blessing of Mary! Mary's Magnificat! Simeon's *Nunc dimittis*! Anna's unknown song of praise. Beautiful songs of praise and thanksgiving, but also full of kingdom language, upheaval language, hopeful work-of-God language. These songs offer the same antidote to fear that the angels do. See the Word! Notice the work of God around you! And remember the persistence of God! The relentlessness of God.

God has promised to never give up on you! To never give up on creation. That's the main thing we gather to celebrate this evening. God's presence with us, always and forever, no matter what. God's stubborn refusal to give up on us or abandon us. God is even willing to experience that which is anathema to the immortal, death itself, in order to show us the depths of God's love and care for us. The sheer stubbornness of God's love and grace.

Here I go again, preaching what I need to hear! Well, I hope some of you (at least) needed to hear it too. Into the midst of brokenness and fear, the Word of God is born. Into our despair and anxiety the Word of God's hope is born. See! Notice! God is here! Amen!