

## Do Not Be Afraid!

Isaiah 9:2-7 Luke 2:1-20 December 24 2008

Christmas Eve at Byron Presbyterian Church

Have you seen any angels this week? Of course you have, they're everywhere, in decorations and cards, in pageants and performances. Do these angels make you feel happy as we approach Christmas? I hope so! So I find it astounding that in the Bible story every time an angel appears, someone becomes afraid! How do we know this? Because the first thing the angel says is "Do not be afraid". The angel appears to Joseph - do not be afraid. The angel appears to Mary - do not be afraid. The angel appears to the shepherds - do not be afraid. Wow, there appear to be a lot of people who are feeling afraid at the time of Jesus' birth!

Let's pause for a moment and think about being afraid. What are the things that make you feel afraid? Let's start with the most common source of fear: do any of you have hungry monsters with big teeth and sharp fangs hiding under your bed? Or maybe they hide in your closet? Where I grew up, the monsters were in the basement. I remember a time when I was down there watching TV by myself. All of a sudden we had a power failure and I was in total darkness. Even though I was old enough and smart enough to know that there really were no monsters living in our basement, as I ran up the stairs to find my parents I could feel several of those monster trying to grab me, their claws scrabbling to get a firm grip on my heel. Let me tell you, when I reached the safety of the top of the stairs I

slammed the door behind me. But even then I was sure something was trying to push the door open behind me. My parents, who were digging around in kitchen drawers to find flashlights, candles and matches, didn't seem to be aware of how close I came to becoming a hungry monster's dinner. The first thing they asked me was, "Did you turn the TV off before you came upstairs? Can you go back downstairs and turn it off, please, so when the power comes back on we won't have the TV running all night." Well, I did not go back into the basement. It must have been my Dad who went down the stairs. Though he didn't say anything about it, I am sure that he must have fought off a huge swarm of toothy monsters on his way back upstairs.

So, OK, monsters real or imagined can make people feel afraid, and of course they would, just one look at a creepy, scary monster ought to convince you. I'm sure many of you could tell me about the fearful things that may be about to pounce on you: fears about the economy, your savings, your job, even your home, fears for a member of your family who is way way out there on very thin ice, fears about serious sickness in your family, fears about someone you know who is on the front line of a war somewhere in the world. Sometimes these fears are something you can put your hand out to touch, sometimes they exist only in the mind as old memories or new worries, Either way, they are very real to you. Some of these fears can be dealt with reason, by bargaining, or by holding a big stick. But the worst fears are the ones that leave us absolutely powerless because they have a bigger stick, and all we can do is try to run or hide.

But what I don't get is why the people in the Bible stories are afraid when

they see an angel. Shouldn't they be happy? Is it the suddenness? Is it the unexpectedness? Is it the bright light? Is it the wings? Is it the halo? Last year at Christmas time we spent a lot of time thinking about angels, the angels in the Bible story, and the angels we have met in our own lives. But not one of our angels caused anyone here to feel afraid. And look, we have an angel on the top of our Christmas tree - do you feel afraid when you see the angel up there? Of course not. Part of the reason we feel no fear is because we know how the story works out. Although Mary and Joseph each have reason to disbelieve the angels, and hesitate to follow the angel's instructions, in the end it all works out. Mary and Joseph will have that baby no matter what, even though they must make a long journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, even though there is no suitable place available in which to give birth. And the baby is welcomed by shepherds, singing angels, and even wise men from a far country.

But at the beginning of the story there is a lot for them to fear. The angel tells Mary and Joseph that their baby will change the world. That sounds hopeful and exciting, but the truth is that Mary and Joseph were poor peasants living in a land occupied by a foreign army. In such places of oppression smart people survive by keeping their heads down, to avoid calling attention to themselves. So all the noise made by those shepherds shouting would have drawn uncomfortable attention to Mary and Joseph and their baby. It would have been considered a threat to the power of the Emperor in Rome, and the soldiers might come quickly to put a stop to it. The Emperor was officially the Son of God, and he had no tolerance for rivals, even if they were only babies. And later, wise men from the east

came looking for the baby they called the King of the Jews. When Herod, who already was the King of the Jews, heard about it his immediate plan was to kill all the babies in the region. Mary and Joseph had every reason to feel fear when the angels came to them with the message about a new baby.

So there is fear in one part of the story, in the same way that there may be fear in part of your story. But that is not how the story ends, and fear is certainly not the last word.

In the celebration of Christmas, we welcome the coming of Christ, born in a time of many fears, born in the least important town of Israel, maybe even born in the worst slum in that town. The story of Mary and Joseph is a powerful reminder that God always begins with the nobodies, with those who appear to count for very little in the progress of humankind, and that what we fear God has more than enough to overcome.

Long before Jesus' birth the prophet Isaiah looked ahead to a time when the fears of the world would begin to melt away: "The people who lived in darkness have seen a great light". In our homes, as in our churches, Christmas is a time for lights -- bright lights, white lights, lights of many colors -- neon lights on storefronts; spotlights in decorated doorways -- and the light of the candle too! All of these lights describe our experience of Jesus, the true light who came into the world to chase away the fear and darkness. All of these lights point to Jesus, who fills our hearts with the warm glow of his redeeming and reconciling love. Light is shining through the dividing walls we have built, between heaven and

earth, women and men, old and young, rich and poor, north and south, east and west, and the fears begin to melt away. This is light that warms our hearts, brightens our eyes, and melts our indifference, prejudice and hate. Can we think of dark, fearful places where we can make the light shine? Let us take this light which we have received in the birth of Jesus and offer it as a shining beacon of hope, giving visibility to the witness of angels: "Glory to God in the highest, and peace to God's people on earth!" Let us pray: Come, Lord Jesus. Come to be born anew in our hearts and lives this Christmas Day. Come with love, joy, and peace to lives and people desperately in need of news that is good, that is glad, that brings hope, comfort, and joy, news that pushes the fears aside. Yes, come, Lord Jesus. Amen.