

Sore Afraid

Homily for Christmas Eve, December 24, 2020

Reading: Luke 2:1-14

Sermon text: In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see-- 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.

Do not be afraid. It is the standard angelic opening line.

But the shepherds were afraid. As the Greek text has it: they were afraid with a great fear, extremely afraid, severely and insistently—sore afraid, as great KJV translation puts it. They were sore afraid.

Wouldn't you be?

I would be. Since the appearance of an angel must be awesome and uncanny and potent; and in this case loud, as the messenger is accompanied by the sound of the host of heavens singing praises to God.

This was not the ominous music of a movie soundtrack signaling the presence of danger, but a joyful noise. The heavenly host, the angelic choir. And perhaps, as often happens when God appears, according in the psalms, the earth and hills and forests joined in singing.

Wow.. take am moment to imagine all creation, heaven and earth bursting into joyful song.

But even that might be frightening in its own way. So new, unexpected, different. We jump. What's happening? Only an angel of the Lord and the host of heaven...

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom—so reads a proverb in wisdom. But perhaps that is because fear makes us pay attention. And once we really pay attention, we are ready for the good news to be truly heard.

So the strange and frightening appearance of the angel may be part of the message. Hark! Listen up. We are brought to full attention.

Then the word of comfort, do not be afraid.

I have good news—good news of great joy for all the people.

Unlike when the prophets speak, angels usually bring good news. You will have a child, the angels told Sarah and Abraham, you will have a child the angel told Mary. There is born this day a child, the angel told the shepherds, a savior for all the world.

The prophets had given him names and titles: Emmanuel, God-with-us, everlasting Counsellor. Prince of peace.

Peace, the place where fear is put aside. Can we still find that? Peace in a world of covid, conspiracy and hard struggle for justice and daily bread?

Yes, if we understand that peace only comes after struggle. The way of peace is none other than the way of the cross. For the cross is the breaking down of the barrier between what is and ought to be, the offering of life for love. It is what makes peace possible.

In this world there is no peace, in the sense that struggle will end. Every generation will have its own struggles, its own crosses to bear—and indeed we see a great challenge in climate change breaking upon the rising generations. The continuing struggle for justice and mercy. These will always be needed.

But in heaven there is deep unbreakable peace. And heaven came to earth this day in a little town of Bethlehem. As the psalmist sang, “Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other. Truth shall spring out of the earth; and righteousness shall look down from heaven” (Psalm 85).

Christmas is when heaven and earth come together and give birth to a child, and the angels sing, do not be afraid, God’s will is peace on earth, and good will among people.

Pray for peace to come to your heart, and to this struggling world.

But before peace comes faith. Faith is the rock on which the house of peace is built.

And by faith, I mean trust. We also celebrate this night because the birth of Jesus is a great gift for faith in God. For we trust Jesus, we can follow Jesus, in ways that are hard sometimes for an abstract God above, sovereign of creation, the Father almighty, or even problematic, like the divine within, the holy Spirit. Jesus is not God above, to whose sovereign will we must submit—but whom we must fear and respect. Nor is Jesus exactly the same as the holy Spirit, the presence and power of God within us. To trust in the Spirit within is perhaps more difficult than we give credit—for it opens the door to efforts at self-improvement might become like tests or skills we must master to be saved, spiritual exercises to harness and tap into the divine power within. I don't trust in myself to do that. But I trust in the one who is called Emmanuel, God with us. God in human form, who walks beside us, who was born helpless and dependent, but who grew up to be loving and strong and wise. Who shows me daily the path of love I can follow, who guides me into the green pastures of peace and joy, who protects me against all adversaries, and who has gone through struggle, suffering and death—and emerged victorious to take away our deepest fear—of death.

It is he whom I trust, and who I vowed to follow when I recommitted myself as a Christian when my son Eli was baptized these many years ago. In all that time I have found no reason to doubt my choice—and every reason to confirm my faith and my decision to commit to Christ and the way of love. In him I have found courage and peace.

May you also this year find the angelic message reassuring. May you be blessed with courage, peace and ever deepening faith. For the angel has brought us good news of great joy. For to us is born a savior, Jesus Christ our brother, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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