

Christmas 2005
Text: Luke 2:1-14

When you hear the word “angel” what do you see in your mind’s eye? Is your mental picture shaped more by Renaissance art—or more by someone like “Clarence” in “It’s a Wonderful Life?” Do your angels have wings?

While most of us probably have some kind of mental picture, we do well to pause—especially on a night like this when so many of them are singing around us. In truth, the Bible itself is fairly sparse on details about angels. Literally in Greek the word means simply “messenger.” An angel, then, is a divine messenger who brings a message from God to human beings. The Biblical writers seem to be consistently more interested in the message itself, rather than the messenger. Whatever your image of angels is, then—it is *message* that calls us together on this holiest of nights as the people of God.

So let’s take a closer look at that message. The angel of the Lord stands before those shepherds and the glory of the Lord shone all around them. Predictably, they are terrified. Or as one of the great hymns of Christmas puts it: they “quaked at the sight.”

But listen again to what the angel *says*—this time in cadences of the King James’ Bible:

Fear not!
For behold, I bring you good tidings
of great joy
which shall be to all people.
For to you is born this day, in the city of David,
a Saviour
which is Christ the Lord.

It is that message, and its implications for us as the people of God—here, and now, on this night, in this world—that I want to reflect upon with you for a few minutes.

“*Fear not.*” It seems to me that if there is one thing that brings more pain to people’s lives than anything else it is fear. Frightened people act in incredibly unhealthy and destructive ways, and I am more and more convinced that it is fear more than anything else that leads us to what we call sin.

“Terror alerts” and “war against terror” have become simply part of the vocabulary of our time. Yet I believe that the terrorists we have come to fear are, in many ways, no less frightened than we. They are frightened by poverty and war, and by what they perceive as Western imperialism and consumerism. Don’t misunderstand me; I’m not in the least excusing immoral behavior. It’s fine to label murder as evil and all the rest—in fact it’s exactly the theological point that needs to be made—fear does lead us into temptation and evil.

But we need to be willing to examine the root causes if anything is ever going to change—and to do that we must at least try to see ourselves as “the other” sees us—no matter how painful that may be. We need also to see how fear is also leading *us* into temptation, and how quickly frightened people can become the very thing they hate.

Fear divides people—and frightened people become either victims or terrorists—although I’m not sure the line between those is quite so sharp as we sometime believe it to be. I think at least part of what the angels say to us is that you cannot fight fear with fear—you overcome fear with love. You bring light to the darkness. That is “the Way” of this Jesus—and the only way to peace on earth and good will toward all.

Fear destroys us from the inside out—and when it is finished with us it destroys relationships by ridding us of the ability to trust others. In the end of course it separates us from God, and that is where it becomes sin in the theological sense. Fear makes community impossible because it destroys trust, and relationships require trust. Without trust we become separated from God, others, and ourselves.

If that is the “bad news” of the world we live in, then isn’t it interesting that the first words out of the angel’s mouth on this holy night—not only to those shepherds living in the fields but to each generation—and to us here and now, are: “do not be afraid.” *Fear not!*

The messengers tell us this “word of the Lord” is “*for all people.*” The Church is a community of disciples called to remember this Word and to live by this Word until Christ’s Second Advent. We are entrusted to be agents of reconciliation and healing in the world. As individuals we cannot do it alone; but as a Body—as a global communion—we can with God working through us do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. To claim Jesus as Lord gives us not special privileges but special responsibilities—not a magical connection to God but a vocation to serve God by practicing neighborly love. Our primary vocation is given us this night: to let love cast out fear—to choose faith over fear by putting our trust in the One whose birth we celebrate this night.

The message is for all peoples—but it is the Church that is entrusted with proclaiming this word in every generation. (Sometimes it’s necessary to use words.) God comes into the world as a child to experience the world not as Creator but as creature. As this child grows and begin to teach around the Sea of Galilee, and then in Jerusalem, he shows us how to overcome our fear by putting our trust in Him. He shows us that we must not let our fears dictate the kind of people we are becoming, or the kind of church we are becoming, or the kind of nation we are becoming, or the kind of world we are becoming. He shows us that all the way to Good Friday and beyond, at the empty tomb: that the way of the Kingdom of God brings forth a new reality of hope and life and peace to all.

“*For behold!*” the angel says. I wish that the NRSV had not have let go of the word “behold.” We heard tonight when I read the gospel the first time that the angels tell us to “see.” But “see” is such a wimpy word compared with “behold”—which is something more like: hey-you-pay-attention-and-look-right now-quickly-because-this-is-really-urgent all wrapped up into one. *Behold!*

Listen up, the angel says. “*I bring good news—glad tidings—of a great joy for all people.*” That is a mouthful, but in Greek that word, whether we say “good news” or “glad tidings” is *gospel*. It reveals another truth—another path—the Way that leads to full and abundant life. It is gospel truth that dispels fear and brings in its place joy.

Joy is light in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it. Joy is deeper than happiness, deeper than emotion. Joy is the birth of a child—the birth of any child but especially the birth of *this* child, Jesus. For in his face we see the face of God.

This Advent I had one of those magical days that come to a priest every now and again to remind us of our true calling, and of the joy in ministry even when it is at times difficult. On a Friday morning I went and visited a man who is in the Essex Country Prison, and from there went to visit a parishioner who lives in a retirement community on the north shore, and from there went into the maternity ward at St. Vincent's hospital to see a staff member who had just given birth to a baby boy—the very child who got to play “baby Jesus” in our pageant earlier tonight. That day for me was in many ways my Christmas celebration this year: for was able to behold Christ in that prison, that retirement community and that maternity ward all within the span of a day's work.

But it is something the man in prison said to me that has stayed with me. He told me that it took incarceration for him to find the gift of sobriety, and therefore the gift of freedom. He noted the irony of being locked up to discover that freedom. He spoke of the “joy” he has found—and that was his word—that even on the worst days of prison life there is joy if one chooses to see it. I was reminded of St. Paul, writing to Christians from a prison cell, who could say: “rejoice I say, rejoice...again I say, rejoice.”

The message of the angels, then, invites us not back to a pastoral scene in the hills of first-century Palestine. Rather, it invites us—even prods us—to see *this* time and *this* place and *this* night and *this* community through new eyes. Behold! And live your life in such a way that “Joy to the World” is what people hear when they see you coming.

The shepherds get a sign—the child in the manger. But there are signs all around us as well, if only we know how to behold—and if only we dare to listen in a noisy world to the songs of angels:

- A child is born—and that child, our child or our grandchild changes how we see ourselves—and points us toward a brighter future, and to the fulfillment of our deepest yearnings.
- A loved one dies a holy death—and we are there to hold their hand as they pass from this world to the next; and in that moment we know that life is changed, not ended, when death comes for us;
- Reconciliation happens where we thought it impossible—relationships are restored, and healed, and life is new again;
- A calm quiet house, with the children all safely snug in their beds, with visions of sugar plums dancing in their heads brings us to a sense of awe and wonder and joy that puts us in touch with our truest and best selves;.
- A church full of people who come from very different places but here, and now—come together to sing old familiar carols and to break one bread and to share one cup—becoming an outward and visible “sign” for all the world of unity, peace, hope, joy, and love.

The signs are all around us if we but have eyes to see and ears to hear—and they call us to joy and to give glory to God in the highest heaven. They call us to honor this Prince of Peace by being instruments of that peace on earth.

So do not be afraid. For behold—the messenger brings us good news of a great joy for all the people—good news for us—here and now in the town of Holden and in the city of Worcester—a Savior is born, which is Christ the Lord. Merry Christmas!