

The Fourth Sunday in Advent
December 23-24, 2017
Luke 1:26-38

“Do Not Be Afraid”

This is one of those strange days when it is the Fourth Sunday in Advent this morning, but come sundown, it is Christmas Eve. That’s what happens when Christmas Eve falls on a Sunday, as it does this year. Some may even be wondering why there is a morning service at all today. Won’t all the people be coming to church tonight for Christmas Eve? We certainly could dispense with having a morning worship service, but I think our life in Christ would be diminished and reduced as a result. The Fourth Sunday in Advent has a message and theme all its own. The Gospel lesson of the angel Gabriel’s announcement to Mary that she would be the mother of the promised Messiah is before us, and this prepares us for what is to come this evening with the birth of that Messiah. Today, on this Fourth Sunday in Advent, we focus on Luke’s account of the Annunciation under the theme, “Do Not Be Afraid.” May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

For this sermon, I am borrowing from what I wrote in the December newsletter for our congregation. You may have read this already. If you haven’t, then all of this is new and fresh. If you have, then pretend that it is new and fresh. It’s that time of year when we love to watch all those holiday movies, including the classic 1965 “A Charlie Brown Christmas.” Charlie Brown can’t figure out why he’s not happy at Christmas time. With all of the decorations, caroling, and gift giving, he knows he should be happy, but he’s not. So he decides to visit his “psychiatrist,” Lucy van Pelt, who begins to analyze him, trying to help him figure out what he’s afraid of and that keeps him from being happy. After a lot of back and forth, Lucy asks Charlie Brown if he has pantophobia, the fear of everything. And he shouts, “That’s it!” Children are often very open about the things they’re afraid of. Not so much with adults. We may be embarrassed to admit the things that we are afraid of because they may seem rather childish or silly, but still we’re afraid. Maybe it’s shots and needles, or going to the dentist, or standing up in front of people, or a host of other things that make us afraid. The truth is that whether we’re five years old or seventy-five years old, there are things in life that make us afraid. The Advent-Christmas message is all about God breaking into our world and our lives in the person of his own Son, Jesus. In Jesus, God himself confronts our deepest fears.

Throughout the Christmas story, we hear those words: “Do not be afraid.” They crop up at different points in the Gospels, but they are there. In today’s Gospel lesson, when the angel Gabriel visited Mary, telling her that she would be the mother of Jesus, we read that **“she [Mary] was greatly troubled at the saying”** (Luke 1:29). In other words, Mary was afraid. And who wouldn’t be? Being visited by an angel of God would make any one of us fearful. The angel said to her: **“Do not be afraid, Mary...”** (Luke 1:30). When he learned that his fiancé was pregnant and the child was not his, Joseph planned to break off his engagement to Mary and call off the wedding, not publicly, but privately, for Mary’s sake. We read in Scripture: **“But after he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife’”** (Matthew 1:20). In Luke’s account of the birth of Jesus, as the angel brought this good news to shepherds who were out in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night, we are told: **“An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid’”** (Luke 2:9-10). Mary, Joseph, shepherds—all of them were afraid. But the message to all of them was the same: “Do not be afraid.”

The Lord speaks those same words to us today: “Do not be afraid.” In the midst of a world that looks like it’s spinning out of control, as it seems to have been especially during this past year, our fears may be ratcheting ever upward. Our world today may look very much like the world when Jesus was born:

instability and unrest, greed and exploitation, terrorism and violence. But this is the world that Jesus entered into so that He might save and redeem it. And this is the **“good news of great that will be for all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord”** (Luke 2:10-11). We have a God who did not choose to remain lofty and removed from the fears of his people. No, we have a God who willingly chose to come into our world to become one of us in every respect, except for sin (Hebrews 4:15). This is Jesus, whose very name means Savior, for **“He will save his people from their sins”** (Matthew 1:21).

Back to Charlie Brown: after he tries to direct the Christmas pageant and even that doesn't go well, he cries out in frustration: “Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?” And his good friend, Linus, steps up and tells him (and all of us) what Christmas is really all about. Linus tells the Christmas story from Luke 2. One of the Christmas cards my family and I received this year shows this very scene. Cool! There are lots of people like Charlie Brown who are all around us. They, too, are afraid of a great many things in life. They, too, want to know what Christmas is all about. If ever there was a “joining Jesus on his mission” time of year, this is it! Now, on the very eve of celebrating Jesus' birth, be ready to point people to the Christ of Christmas. Be ready to invite people who are hungry for Jesus (but may not even know it) to come and meet the Savior. Be ready to love people as Jesus has loved us.

On this Fourth Sunday in Advent, whatever you may be afraid of, Jesus invites you to come to him in all your fear and need. As we've been singing throughout this Advent season in “The First Song of Isaiah” (from Isaiah 12:1-6): “Surely it is God who saves me. I will trust in him and not be afraid...” The holy Child of Mary invites you to turn your fears and needs over to him so that he may help you and bless you. Because of Jesus, we say with all boldness and confidence what Paul wrote in today's Epistle lesson: **“Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith – to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen”** (Romans 16:25-27). Amen.