

Message for December 26, 2021

Matthew 1:18-23

One day a few years ago I was sitting in the living room reading a book of Christmas sermons while some Christmas music was playing softly in the background. The book was printed about fifty years ago and while I don't know how they sounded when they were first preached, by and large I found them rather boring. I was at the point of giving up on the book altogether when I came across a real gem.

The preacher began his sermon by gently poking fun at how the birth of Jesus is so often portrayed whether it be through song, Christmas cards, or even Sunday School pageants. He noted that we generally like to think of Jesus' birth as being so nice and sweet. He insisted though that the reality is that the birth of Jesus was actually a very frightening experience for all concerned. To support this, he pointed out how often the words 'fear' and 'afraid' are used in the nativity story; in fact they pop up over and over again. I must admit that as often as I have read the accounts of what happened that first Christmas, this was something that I had never really noticed before. That preacher though was absolutely right; the words 'fear' and 'afraid' do crop up again and again. In fact the fear started at the very beginning.

"In the sixth month" said Luke, "God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendent of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said 'Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you.' Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, 'Don't be afraid Mary'."

Mary's initial response to the appearance of the angel was not joy and excitement, rather it was fear, and no wonder! When we think of angels, we often think of them as being rather gentle, demure beings. For many of us, our image of angels has been shaped by popular movies and TV shows such as "It's a Wonderful Life", "Angels in the Outfield", and "Touched by an Angel". But while we may like to think of angels as being like friendly brothers and sisters watching over us, that is not the way they are portrayed in the Bible. In the Bible these other worldly messengers of God are rather frightening figures whose

appearance invariably inspires fear and dread. But the appearance of the angel wasn't the only thing that scared Mary that day, there was also his message.

Who was she of all people to be the mother of the Messiah? Why she was just an ordinary village girl in her mid teens! And what about the scandal of the pregnancy itself? How could she ever explain to her family or her fiancé that she, a virgin, was now expecting? If Joseph didn't believe her and called the marriage off, she would be an unwed mother and in that society at that time she would be disgraced. Truly Mary had every right to be scared by the angel's message, but the fear didn't just begin and end with Mary.

Matthew tells us that when Joseph learned about Mary's pregnancy, he decided to quietly get a divorce, a divorce being the only way of ending a formal engagement. It is obvious that Joseph loved Mary and didn't want to humiliate her. It is equally obvious though that he didn't believe her explanation either. Joseph was afraid that he had been betrayed, but then an angel appeared to him in a dream and told him, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit". This reassured Joseph but that wasn't the end of either his or Mary's fear. In fact it was just the beginning.

We may sometimes be tempted to think of the circumstances surrounding the birth of Jesus as being like some sort of marvelous adventure for Mary and Joseph, but it wasn't. First there was the unexpected and unwelcome government orders to go to Bethlehem, sixty miles away, for the census. Then came the grueling journey itself with Mary due to give birth at any time. When they finally arrived in Bethlehem, they discovered that there was no where for them to stay. No, this was not a marvelous adventure for the soon-to-be new parents! Rather it was a nightmare, and then for the baby to be born in a cattle stall? Even allowing for the primitive hygiene of the first century A.D., this was far from ideal. But moving along, what about the shepherds?

Luke tells us that there were shepherds out in the fields guarding their flocks against thieves, wolves, and other predators. Suddenly an angel appeared before them and, bearing in mind what I have already said about angels, it is no wonder that they were afraid. In fact they weren't just afraid, the word in the original Greek of the New Testament says that they were absolutely terrified and so the angel had to tell them not to be afraid. And what about the wise men?

We have no way of knowing if they were afraid to make the long journey from their homeland to Judea in search of the newborn King of the Jews, but we can be sure that they were afraid when they left Judea to return home. They were warned in a dream not to return to Herod to tell him about Jesus because Herod wanted to kill the child. There can be little doubt that Herod wouldn't have hesitated to kill them either. Herod after all was the man who had executed his own wife and three of his sons. Indeed, Herod was the man of whom a Roman emperor, not known for his own mercy and compassion, once remarked "It is safer to be a pig at Herod's court than a member of his family". The wise men must have been afraid when they left after seeing Jesus and were in fact probably on the run, fearing for their lives.

Truly when it comes to that first Christmas it was not a case of "all is calm, all is bright". The truth is that there was a real element of fear for all of the participants. And yet, they all did their part. They did so because they had faith and knew that God was with them. And that is what that first Christmas was all about too; the presence of God with his people and, by implication, with us as well.

Next Saturday is of course New Year's Day when we will welcome the gift of a brand new year. New Year's, like Christmas, is supposed to be a time of celebration and anticipation as we look to a new year with all of its hopes and possibilities. For so many people today though, such is not the case. The pandemic for example has been going on now for over twenty-one months with no end in sight; in fact a return to pre-pandemic life without living with a sense of fear seems to be as far off as ever. And there are also other worries and concerns as well such as inflation as the supply chains continue to struggle. There are the usual international tensions too such as those between Ukraine and Russia. To this we can add climate change as the weather becomes ever more unpredictable; all we need to do is look at what recently happened in British Columbia and Kentucky for example. To all of this we can even add our personal worries and concerns; truly the list can go on and on.

For so many people today for so many reasons, this is not a time characterized by joy and anticipation. Rather it is a time characterized by uncertainty and even fear. And yet, as we let go of Christmas for yet another year and prepare to welcome the gift of a new year, we should remember one of the great promises of Christmas. That quite simply is that God is with us; that

as he joined us in the flesh in the person of Jesus two thousand years ago, he still does today through the person of the Holy Spirit. To put it another way, Christmas isn't just about what God did so long ago, Christmas is also about what God still does today. As Jesus himself said at the end of his earthly ministry: "Lo, I am with you always, to the end of time".

I am with you. This is the wonderful promise of Christmas and this is what gave Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, and the wise men the strength and courage to do what they did despite their fear. And as it was with them, so it is with us; the Christmas promise sustains us all year long no matter what the circumstances may be. And it is this that enables us to not only sing but truly believe these words from this morning's last hymn:

"He will never fail us,
He will not forsake;
His eternal covenant
He will never break.
Resting on His promise
What have we to fear?
God is all-sufficient
For the coming year.
Onward, then and fear not,
Children of the day,
For His word shall never,
Never pass away."

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, hear us as we once again turn to you in prayer on this day after Christmas.

We give you thanks for what we have been, and indeed still are celebrating: that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth. We thank you for the meaning, hope and promise of that special birth in Bethlehem; that you love us, forgive us, redeem us, and sustain us.

We thank you for the many pleasures of this time of year. Even in times such as these with all of the stress, worries and restrictions, there is still so much to be grateful for.

We thank you for our families, loved ones, and friends. We thank you for the food that nourishes us and our homes that shelter us.

We thank you for the little everyday things that bring us pleasure and give meaning and purpose to our lives.

We thank you for this nation and society in which we live, realizing that while it is far from perfect, we are still so much better off than so many of your children.

In this season of peace and goodwill, we pray for the sake of peace as the tensions between Ukraine and Russia continue to simmer.

Above all though we thank you for the gift of your presence amongst us during what was and still is, a very difficult year. We thank you for all those giving so much of themselves in the effort to keep the rest of us safe and well. Grant not only them, but all of us, the strength and courage that only you can give. Grant that the year soon to begin may be better than this one now ending, and help us to remember too that whatever it may have in store, you *are* with us and that is enough indeed.

In your Son's name we pray. Amen