

Christmas Eve, 2014  
Luke 1: 26-33; 38; Luke 2: 1-11

### What the Angels Said

*May the Christ-Child bless these words and those who hear them this Christmas Eve. Amen.*

Something happened here this evening while we were out fighting the crowds at the mall, or baking Christmas cookies, or fretting about whether we bought the right present for our brother-in-law. Christ was born! God is here. We've heard various renditions of this wondrous truth in our scripture readings this evening, but I want to include how the Gospel writer John describes what happened. He writes, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. . . (and so) The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1: 1-3, 14). The Word, Jesus Christ, became flesh, like us; was born, like us. The Word, Jesus Christ, became Emmanuel, which means God-with-us. Then. And now.

This Advent, our theme has been the many names of Christ, and we've explored different titles used for Christ throughout scripture. While each title is significant, the titles are, in the end, just words, but words that become important when they are part of the reason we gather to celebrate Emmanuel's birth. God-with-us is also the Prince of Peace, the Comforter, the Counselor, the Morning Star, the Dayspring, and especially Love.

Words shape us and have an impact on us when we let them sink into our being. Throughout scripture, from beginning to end, certain words become almost a refrain, a chant that describes who this Emmanuel is and how we are to live as his children. These words are found even as early as Genesis 15: "After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: '**Do not be afraid, Abram.** I am your shield, and your great reward.'" Do not be afraid.

In Matthew, when the angel appears to Joseph in a dream, he states, "Joseph, **do not be afraid** to take Mary as your wife." In Luke, when the angel appears to the father of John the Baptist, his first words are, "**Do not be afraid**, Zechariah. Your prayers have been heard." And when the angel appears to Mary, he says, "**Do not be afraid**, Mary, for you have found favor with God." To the shepherds in the field keeping watch over their flocks, the angel of the Lord says, "**Do not be afraid.** I bring you tidings of great joy." And thirty-three years later, at the scene of the empty tomb, an angel tells a handful of faithful women, "**Do not be afraid**, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. But he has risen." Do not be afraid.

When I think of that phrase, I think of Mary. There she was, an unwed teenager and a second-class citizen, no doubt ridiculed or gossiped about when her pregnancy became

known. And there she was, nine months pregnant, on a dangerous road to Bethlehem where bandits lurked and crowds jostled and bumped her, and foreign soldiers kept their own kind of watch. This was not the life she had planned. Everything was suddenly very different. *Do not be afraid.* She must have repeated those words to herself over and over as she and Joseph entered an unfamiliar town, and, heavy with child, she couldn't even find a place to lie down. Walking by Roman soldiers who looked at her with scorn, she must have remembered those words and perhaps even said them out loud as she gave birth, always a most dangerous procedure to both mother and baby, with only her husband present in a stall that smelled of animals.

But Mary's greatest act of courage and supreme trust in God happened when she wrapped that little baby, her new son, in strips of cloth and laid him in the manger, not really understanding what lay ahead for him but sensing that it would be something both amazing and painful. In that one holy moment, with all the noise and hustle and dangers lurking around her, with King Herod getting ready to call for the execution of all male infants, she must have prayed, "Do not be afraid," as she completed what God had asked of her. She must have prayed, "Do not be afraid, little one," to the helpless son that she had never planned. She must have said, "Do not be afraid," to the husband who had stood by her side, yet had no idea what the future held for his new family. **Do not be afraid.** How hard it is to listen, to let go of fear, to trust, even on this holiest of nights.

Then there is Joseph, a man who rarely gets our attention, a man who utters not one word in the whole birth narrative, but whose actions speak louder than any words. When the angel came to him in dream and told Joseph to take Mary as his wife and not to be afraid, he must have thought, "This is not what I had planned. Everything is suddenly different." Do not be afraid. When the angel visited again and said, "Get out of town. Become an immigrant and flee to a foreign country because Herod wants to kill your son," Joseph must have wondered, "What do I do? How do I get through this?" as his own plans crumbled at his feet. Yet he clung to that command, "Do not be afraid," like a lifeline and made his feet and his family go where the angel told them to go.

Who of us has not faced fear? Who of us has not felt time stand still as the world moves on around us, while we are caught in a net of worry and confusion and anxiety? We live in a very fearful world, facing some of the same worries and threats that Mary and Joseph did. What lies ahead of us in the coming year? What lies ahead of you? The possibilities are limitless: Surrendering the known to face the unknown; rearing children; letting children go; facing times of illness; being alone; being rejected; being limited by age; losing loved ones; failure; success; concerns over finances and future well-being; taking risks; career choices; finding a partner; losing a partner; our own mortality; eternity. Yet into this fearful world, a child has been born by a young teen and her carpenter husband who chose to trust what the angels said to them.

The Good News pronounced by the angel to Mary and Joseph is also the good news pronounced to us tonight. In the birth of Jesus Christ, God came to earth to personally deliver a four word message to us, all of us: "**Do not be afraid.**" Do not be afraid, children! Do not be afraid, young people! Do not be afraid, mothers and fathers and grandparents! Do not be afraid, you who are single, divorced, remarried, or widowed! Do not be afraid, middle-aged and elderly! Do not be afraid because the Son of God is light who shines into the darkness of fear, confusion, and uncertainty. Do not be afraid because the Son of God became flesh and dwelt among us so that he could experience what we experience, could feel what we feel. Do not be afraid, because you are a Child of God and nothing can take that from you. Emmanuel never said, "Be afraid!" He never said, "Run from fear!" Instead, Emmanuel said, "Peace I bring you. My peace I leave you." Do not be afraid.

God is in our world now, at this very moment, to take our hand when we walk our journeys, to pick us up when we stumble, to comfort us when we hurt, to love us into fearlessness, to accept us as we are, and to trust that, no matter what, all is well.

The angel--God's messenger to us--says, "Do not be afraid." And Jesus' last recorded words in the Gospel of Matthew are, "Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." Jesus leaves no room for fear. Tonight, let us trust the Christmas angels whose great glad tidings tell and pray, "O Come to us, abide with us, Our Lord Emmanuel." Amen.