



“Christmas Message 2017”
Scripture – Luke 2:1-20
Sermon preached by Dr. Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, December 24, 2017

I suspect most of you have had a hearty Christmas dinner this evening and many have enjoyed a glass of wine. You may be getting cozy next to a loved one and in danger of nodding off if the preacher goes too long this evening. No need to worry. I got the memo – Keep it short!

But where to focus the laser on this night of wonder, reverence, and awe? The premier Christmas passages from Isaiah, Matthew, Luke, and John strike several weighty themes: Hope, Peace, Joy, Love, God-With-Us, Salvation, Light overcoming darkness.

As I pondered the passages and mulled over the current state of our world and reflected on what is happening in the lives of many of you, the message that emerged was the communiqué of the angels: Do not be afraid.

“Joseph, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife.” Mary, “Do not be afraid, for you have found favor with God. You will bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.” Shepherds, “Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.”

Messengers of God – that is what angels are – repeatedly called on people to muster their courage in order to face what they needed to face and to do what they needed to do. And isn’t that a message each of us needs to take to heart?

We are living in a climate of fear. We are fearful of violence, fearful of terrorism, fearful of a deadly blunder by North Korea or our own government. We fear that hate groups are feeling emboldened, that greed has become acceptable, that people who are elderly, poor, or mentally ill have been forgotten. Some fear their job will be eliminated, and they will lose their health care. As we watch glaciers melt and oceans rise, we fear that we are helpless in the face of climate change.

We may not be able to admit to others that we harbor fears. We may struggle to even admit to ourselves that something frightens us. This is especially a male trait. We think that if we admit to being afraid we are less of a man. But no one is immune, and before we can give thanks for the light, we must first acknowledge the darkness. Before we can sing the joyful Christmas hymns, we must face the pain of life. And before we can hear the message of the angels, we must come to grips with our fears.

Only a fool imagines he has no fear. Often, fears lurk beneath the surface. We generate mental energy to banish frightening thoughts from our consciousness, but they sneak up on us in our dreams or when we are lying awake at night.

I will not ask for a show of hands, especially from the men, but I suspect most of us can identify with at least one of these fears: the fear of failure, aging, death, confinement, addiction, poor health, lacking a purpose, depression, not having enough, or losing what we have.

Many fear God. Some fear God's judgment because they have been such a tepid follower of Jesus. They have not fed the hungry or cared for the homeless or visited the ill, and they may have contributed to discrimination of people unlike themselves rather than loving their neighbor.

However, in our day, I suspect far fewer fear God's judgment than people did in the past. I suspect that today, more people fear God for another reason. We fear that God will call us to go where we do not want to go, to love people we do not want to love and to tackle something we have never attempted.

But, take to heart the message of God's messengers. It was not simply for people long ago. It is a message for you and me this very night. **Do not be afraid!**

Why? Because God is with us. That is what "Emmanuel" means and it is why we celebrate Christmas. God is not in a distant corner of the cosmos unaffected by events on earth. God is with us in all the messiness and struggles of our lives.

Many people of faith elevate Jesus into such a divine figure that he would have surely breezed through life by skimming above the surface of hunger and heartache, temptation and frustration, anxiety and betrayal, suffering and fear. However, the point of celebrating the birth of Jesus is to remember that he was *not* shielded from the struggles of human existence. He was born to a poor couple in a stable. He grew up without one luxury, faced temptations, dealt with difficult people, was ridiculed and finally betrayed.

There is a story about a king who would worry his court by occasionally slipping out of the palace without telling anyone. He would dress as an average citizen and walk among his people. When he was warned not to do so for the sake of his security, he replied, "I cannot help my people unless I know how they live."

Jesus faced the trials of life and showed us that we can garner the courage and fortitude we need to persevere in the face of adversity by giving our heart, mind, and soul to God. He urged us to trust God to guide us to a better day, and along the journey, for God's Spirit to fill us with the internal strength to face our fears and to inspire in us the willpower to overcome them.

Resist the temptation to peer too far into the future and become overwhelmed by the darkness. Resist the temptation to predict that sooner or later your fears will crush you.

When the light dims and the darkness gathers and dread dominates your thoughts; when your heart is filled with panic and your confidence has shriveled and your soul has been drained of joy, search for a speck of light. Summon the lessons you gleaned from past nightmares and begin to set the bricks in place for your foundation of courage. On your own you may falter. But remember – you are not alone. God gives you breath and strength and determination to lift each brick.

As you awake each day, ask God for enough bravery to face the challenges you must face and the daring to seize the opportunities that surface. Each day, cling to the message of God's messengers: Do not be afraid, for unto YOU is born this day...a savior, who is Christ the Lord.

The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving (Communion) ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

Eternal God – Whose Spirit danced across the eons, awakening countless generations to life with you – since the dawn of time, you have yearned to be near us ... In the beginning, you reached into dust and clay to shape human beings in your image, and enlivened us with your breath; in days of wandering and worry, you dwelled among the people, a companion in the wilderness and a guide along the way; when we rejected your love, you entered into our brokenness through the call of prophets, who named our waywardness and beckoned us back to you. All this – persistent God – that you might enfold us in your love.

On this holy night, we rejoice that this was not enough for you. No, in the abundance of your love for us, you were born a fragile babe, laid in a manger and sheltered by the warmth of gentle beasts. You came among us in finite form that we might understand the breadth and depth of your love for us.

Tonight we welcome this holy child with open arms and voices raised in jubilant song. As we gather at this table, we give thanks for your Son, and for his life lived with and for us. We remember that Jesus grew in wisdom and years, bringing good news to the poor and proclaiming release to the captives. We remember that he broke bread with outcasts and sinners, and with friends who would betray and deny him. We remember that Jesus loved us enough to suffer the cross and to shatter its power ... and that he burst from the tomb, showing once and for all that the light shines in the darkness – a light no darkness can overcome.

Holy God – as you visited us in the birth of Jesus, visit us now by the power of your Spirit that we might experience the presence of the Word made flesh. Unite us with Christ, and sustain us to continue his work of hope, peace, joy, and love. Fill us, we pray, with the bread of heaven and the cup of new life, and shed your grace brighter than starlight on us, that we may bear your good tidings to all and renew the weary world in your name: the name of Emmanuel — God-With-Us.

We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, who gave us words to pray:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name,
thy kingdom come, thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power,
and the glory, forever. Amen.**