

We're still talking about good news at Christmas, and one piece of good news that we see repeated in the Christmas story are the words the angels bring to multiple cast members. Those words are: **Don't be afraid!** In 2020, if I were going to be visited by angels and I could choose the message I most would like to hear – Don't be afraid – would be a top pick. If ever there was a headline that would still be good news to us 2,000 years later – Don't be afraid – just might be it.

You know, because you've also lived in the year 2020, that lots has been said about fear and the truth is that lots of you listening today have struggled with new found fears and anxieties. My highly anxious friends have rejoiced that the rest of us have experienced their pain. Every sniffle or slight irritation in the back of the throat this year has led us to fear – is it the covid? We've fearfully wondered: Can we leave the house, can we get together with people, are we going to spread this virus without knowing it? These are all new questions that prompted fear. Who do we listen to? What's true? Do I have the right mask for this outfit? And, there have been serious financial fears – will I lose my job, will there be enough income, will we recover soon enough to not lose the business? Serious fears for our kids – will they fall behind, how much will their mental health suffer in this, will we survive distance learning? Serious fears of not being present to say goodbye to loved ones, not sharing moments and making memories with relatives and friends, and what will the long term affects be of all this? Fears about what everyone is thinking and how everyone is judging our decisions have been plentiful. There are fears abounding this year for sure. But then, the world has always been a fearful place. Fear isn't new even if what we fear is unprecedented. Fear is something that people, including people of faith, have always experienced, and why the Christmas story has produced hope in us for all the ages. This morning we'll look at 4 characters from the Bible:

Zechariah – upright in the sight of God (Luke 1:6)

Mary – highly favored and chosen by God (Luke 1:28)

Joseph – a righteous man (Matthew 1:19)

The Shepherds – chosen by God (Luke 2:9)

All men and women of faith, yet, Zechariah was gripped with fear, Mary was greatly troubled and afraid, Joseph was anxious and fearful, and the shepherds were terrified in the moments when the angels appeared. I don't know about you, but I feel better already,

before we've even read their stories, knowing that godly men and women of long ago also knew what it was to be afraid at times when everything in their world was about to change. It doesn't make me less of a Christian or a bad person to feel fear. Our Christmas characters certainly did. The angels came and announced to each of them don't be afraid, but everything you thought you knew is about to be turned upside down, what I'm about to say next is going to change the way you'll look at everything, the way you understand the world and your place in it, and the trajectory of your life will be permanently altered. Don't be afraid, the angels were saying, but listen closely to what I'm about to speak into your life. As we read their stories and hear the message they were given, I think we will hear a word spoken directly to our hearts that will address our fears in 2020 too.

(First we look at Zechariah and what we hear from him is:)

Zechariah: Don't be afraid because your prayers are being heard.

At the end of the Old Testament we read the words of the prophet Malachi, **"See, I will send you a prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse."** Malachi 4:6 With that final word of both hope and fear God's people began 400 years of silence from God and His prophets. Destruction and judgment were coming, but first God said He would send a prophet and a Messiah to save them. So, for 400 years the people waited and prayed, waited and prayed for a Savior to come. Nations conquered nations and the people of Israel were ruled by one empire after another, but no one could rescue them, no one could save them politically. Sacrifices were offered, but sins were still committed and no one could save them spiritually either.

400 years later a couple by the name of Zechariah and Elizabeth, both descendants from a long line of priests, were living quiet and faithful lives before the Lord. They had prayed for a child, but it had not happened; but still they trusted in the goodness of God and served Him. Zechariah's division within the priesthood was at the temple and he was chosen to be the one that year who would enter to offer incense. It was a once in a lifetime appointment to be chosen to offer the incense and it was a high honor. God had said in Exodus 29 that in these daily offerings he would meet and speak to His people. So it shouldn't be a surprise that God did just that, but in fairness most of us are equally surprised every time that God

does what He said He would do. We pray for a miracle and then when God heals we are shocked – can you believe it? We pray for the answer and when it comes we are flabbergasted that God made a way. We pray for provision and it arrives and we tell our friends – you are not going to believe what God did for me today. We can give Zechariah a little leeway here.

Zechariah, is standing at the altar and the angel appears and announces, **“Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord...He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”** Luke 1:13-17 The Lord had heard their decades long prayers for a son and the Lord had heard the prayers of His people for 400 years before that asking for the promised one to come and in that one moment God assures Zechariah on behalf of all the people that He has in fact heard their prayers and in one baby will answer them all.

Don't be afraid, Zechariah, because God has not forgotten, and God has not turned a deaf ear. It may have taken longer than anyone expected or would have liked, but God knows and hears and has been at work. Don't be afraid, Zechariah, because the answer to your prayers is coming at just the right time.

If we listen we hear that word today as well, don't be afraid for God hears your prayers. God has not been taken by surprise by the events of 2020 in our world or in your home. He has heard your prayers for yourself and your family. It may feel like the heavens are silent and God is not moving on your behalf, but God is listening and He has heard. Don't be afraid, for we serve a God who neither slumbers nor sleeps, but who watches over you day and night. Don't be afraid that your prayers are not getting through, **“This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.”** 1 John 5:14 Rest assured that God has heard you and He will answer at just the right time.

In a moment when Zechariah was gripped with fear the angel speaks of a long awaited revival of repentance that is going to spring forth. It wasn't that his faith conquered the fear, but that his faith informed his fear and it was in his moment of fear that he had a greater revelation of God's plan and purpose. The son they prayed for is going to be the one to fulfill the promises of God to call His people back to Himself. When John is born, Zechariah declares, **"My child will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins."** Luke 1:76-77

Zechariah was gripped with fear, but heard the good news the angel gave him – God has heard your prayers and a revival of repentance is coming.

Mary: Don't be afraid because the Holy Spirit will be with you

Our next character is the lead, Mary, and what we hear from her is...) Long years before she was born the prophet Isaiah had said a virgin would conceive and give birth to a son that would be known as God With Us, but again, no one ever thinks they will be the one to bring about God's promises. Mary, especially, would have never dreamed of such an honor since she was just an ordinary young girl living in a tiny town where nothing much ever happened. Imagine, Luke in recounting the story had to tell the readers of his own day where Nazareth was. He wrote that Gabriel was sent to Nazareth, a town in Galilee. Almost in a "don't worry about it just trust me it's there" sorta way. Literally, no one knew where it was, but God did. He knew exactly where to find the one who was highly favored and chosen for just this moment. Gabriel arrives where she lives and makes quite the announcement. Mary is greatly troubled because she knows as soon as she sees the angel nothing will ever be the same, this event is going to change everything and sure enough the angel gives what we hear as good news, but she hears as earth shattering. She will be with child, and not just any child, but one who will be a King. This raises a lot of questions, because if you think about it fear typically expresses itself in questions. But, what about? How will this? What are we going to do? What's going to happen? Mary sees the biggest obstacle and asks about it first, "How?" and then she explains, "since I am a virgin." The angel answers her, **"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you...For nothing is impossible with God."** Luke 1:35, 37

Don't be afraid, Mary, because it's not all up to you to figure out or make happen. Don't be afraid because you won't be alone. The Holy Spirit will be on you and with you and will empower you and make the impossible become possible.

If we listen a similar message comes to us in the remote places where we live and work and have been confined to and just as God knew where to find the one He had chosen and favored He knows where to find you. In a year where it can feel like nothing is right and you're getting passed over for scholarships because college scouts didn't travel, or passed over for promotions and instead had hours cut, or forgotten at home for months with no one truly seeing the countless hours you've put in for the job, or feeling like you've been swallowed up by the needs of everyone else in the house can I tell you that God knows where you are and sees you and His plans and purposes for your life will still prevail regardless of what 2020 has done. For you are also highly favored and chosen by God. And in that isolated place, like Mary, we have our own fearful questions – but how will we make this work? But, what about 2020? But, what if? And on and on the questions come to us and the answer is still the same – Don't be afraid because you won't face any of that alone. You've not been alone and you won't face the days ahead alone either. Don't be afraid because the Holy Spirit is with you and is making a way for you. Don't be afraid because what you see as impossible the Holy Spirit gives power to make it possible. The problem you see becomes the gateway to new and greater opportunities when the Holy Spirit is the one overshadowing the endeavor. The Holy Spirit wants to calm our anxious thoughts and remind us again that the God of the universe sees us right where we are. Don't be afraid, Mary, but instead catch a revelation of what is about to take place for this son of yours, well, **“He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.” Luke 1:32-33**

A king is coming, the Holy Spirit is with you so don't be afraid.

Joseph: Don't be afraid because the word of God is true.

Now, Zechariah and Mary were both visited by the angel Gabriel, who answered their questions and gave explanation to what would take place. Joseph, however, heard the news in a less dramatic fashion, which only made it less believable. There was no one to ask how or why or for more details and certainly no one to turn to for advice. Who would believe

this as he wasn't sure he believed it either and he didn't need word getting out about his personal life. Fears about his reputation and Mary's, fears about their future, worries about what others would say. It was obvious that decisions needed to be made and rather quickly and where he landed was to just quietly divorce Mary, to end the engagement, and put the whole strange thing behind him. It felt good to just make a decision and he lay down to sleep and that's when everything changed.

The angel of the Lord appeared and spoke his name, Joseph, Son of David. Daniel Darling wrote, **"God didn't pick just any first-century Jewish man to steward the life of His Son. He picked a faithful son of David. The only other person in the New Testament to be referred to as a son of David is Jesus. This title came with authority, reminding Joseph of his royal lineage and preparing him for the task ahead."** Daniel Darling in *The Characters of Christmas* The angel came to remind Joseph who he was, a son of the King, David, a descendant of royalty, part of the covenant of enduring love that had been established long ago. Joseph would need that reminder as he prepared to face the shame and the whispers that would certainly come from those in their circle – he would not find his identity in how the world would define him, but in how God spoke of him. Son of David, one who has authority, one who would be used mightily in the plan of God to see the one he would name Jesus take His place as the King of all Kings.

Next, the angel reminded him of the promises of God to His people – The virgin would be with child, would give birth to a son, and guess what, Mary is that virgin. You'll name him Jesus, because, guess what, He's the long-awaited savior, and He'll be known as Immanuel, God With Us, just like the prophet foretold. It's all true, Joseph, so don't be afraid. Don't be afraid to take Mary home as your wife. Don't be afraid to take part in what the Holy Spirit is orchestrating. Don't be afraid to move forward in what God has called and commanded you to do.

Don't be afraid of what people will say, Joseph, listen to God's word. Don't be afraid, because God's word can be believed even in times of fear. Don't be afraid because what has been promised will come to pass in your life and the life of the son Mary is carrying. Don't be afraid because God is with you.

In the midst of our fears and anxious thoughts if we listen the message comes to us as well, don't be afraid because your identity and your worth come from knowing Jesus and His

word. Everyone has an opinion right now but what God's word says is what matters so don't be afraid of the opinions and the words of others. Don't be afraid that what you've heard and read is only a fairy tale for God's word is living and active and will come to pass. Don't be afraid to trust in His word, **"For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ." 2 Corinthians 1:20** Don't be afraid because God knows who you are and has a plan for you. Don't be afraid because God is with you both now and forever. In that dream Joseph was given a revelation of Jesus as Savior and Immanuel. Everything is about to change because the Savior has come to walk among you and be with you and save you and bring forgiveness. The promised one is so much more than you dared to hope so don't be afraid. God's word is true and God is with you.

The Shepherds: Don't be afraid because there is still good news of great joy.

Lastly, we turn to the shepherds. Once again we find ordinary people doing ordinary things whose lives are about to be changed by an extraordinary encounter. Once more, just as with all the other Christmas story characters, the angel of the Lord appears and the glory of the Lord shines on them and the Shepherds are terrified. Getting a glimpse of ourselves in the light of God's presence has a way of terrifying most people. Isaiah prophetically sees into the throne room and cries out, "I'm undone! I'm ruined! I'm unclean!" as he realizes how holy God is. The glory of God is shining on the Shepherds and they are so afraid until the angel gives that heartwarming message once again – **"Don't be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord."** Luke 2:10-11

Don't be afraid, guys, no one can stand in God's presence and no one can look at His face and live, but today that changes for God has become flesh so that you can gain access to His abiding presence and today you can gaze at Him lying in a manger and become more alive than you've ever been before. Don't be afraid because your sins can be forgiven once and for all and you'll soon be able to approach the throne of grace boldly and without fear.

Don't be afraid, for this Savior is for you and all the people who were just ordinary, regular folk. Don't be afraid because there is good news and the good news is that Jesus has arrived and has come to save all the people. There is no one too far gone or not good enough. Jesus is for all the people – every race and color, tribe and nation. Jesus is for all the people – women and men and children and old people. Jesus came to save all the people from their

sin – the rich people, the poor people, the hungry people, the hopeless people, the people who have never known want or need, the people who are struggling, the ones with mental illness and the ones with anxiety. Those who live in darkness and those who walk on mountain tops. Jesus brings joy to all the people – including the ones with fearful hearts today.

If you listen closely you'll hear that same proclamation shouted in your ear – Don't be afraid because Jesus is here! There is still reason to rejoice and be glad even in the midst of a pandemic, even in the midst of heartache, even in pain, even in fearful moments because the Savior has been born and He is Christ the Lord. Don't be afraid today because Jesus is still showing up in the least likely places and sending out messengers announcing the good news.

The Shepherds, though terrified, got a fresh revelation of who God is – God's Son, The Messiah, the Anointed One, is here and Jesus changes everything. Don't be afraid for there is still good news of great joy.

In 2020, like most years, there have been highs and lows. We've certainly met our share of new and unprecedented things this year and I think for the most part we're all looking forward to bidding this year farewell. But, even today on December 6, 2020, we know with certainty that there is still good news – Don't be afraid today because God hears your prayers, you're not alone today because the Holy Spirit is with you, God's word to you is true, and the best news that sparks joy for all time is that Jesus is here.

We as the people of God need to be reminded today – Don't be afraid. But, let me also remind us today that it was while gripped with fear, troubled, anxious, and terrified that these characters had some of their most incredible experiences with the Lord and gained a greater revelation of who He was and desired to be in their lives. Can I encourage you to let the fears of 2020 propel you into a greater reliance on the Lord, a greater dependency on His presence, a greater awareness of His power, a greater understanding of your identity in Christ and His purpose for you, a greater revelation of Him as Savior and Lord, Healer and Deliverer, a greater realization that He is the soon coming king, a greater knowledge of His word, a greater hunger for His voice, and a greater desire to see the good news of Jesus preached in the whole world.

Here's the last thing I want you to see: As each of these characters heard the message the angels brought they made a decision to obey – not once the fear was gone, but in their fear they chose surrender to the Lord and obedience to Him in all things. Zechariah, doubted at first and spent 9 months in silence, but then he surrendered his own dreams for his life and the life of his son and declared with complete obedience, "His name is John." Mary, though troubled and concerned and fearful of what this would mean for her future boldly and obediently declared, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said." Joseph, anxious though he might have been woke from his encounter with the angel and with great obedience to the Lord whom he served "did what was commanded." And, the Shepherds after hearing a chorus of angels singing praise to God immediately said to one another, "let's go!"

Today, don't let the fears of 2020 keep you from hearing the Lord speak to your heart, or from experiencing God in a new and fresh way, or from acting in obedience to what He is asking of you.

The good news of Advent is:

Don't be afraid

- **Because God hears you**
- **Because He is with you through His Holy Spirit**
- **Because His word to you is true**
- **Because there is reason to rejoice**

Let's pray