

Do Not Be Afraid

Matthew 1:18–25; Luke 2:1–20

Wednesday, December 24, 2025 (Christmas Eve)

Let us pray: Lord, may the good news of this night echo through the centuries to meet us here, that we may find in your Word the hope, peace, joy, and love that we need, in Christ. Amen.

Growing up, the weeks leading up to Christmas were always a time of great excitement and energy and fun. Christmas lights appearing on houses around the neighborhood. Going over to my grandparents' houses to find that they had put up their trees and decorations. Presents appearing under the trees. Santa showing up at the mall. The countdown until school let out. I always loved this time of year. And *tonight* was my favorite night of the year (and not just because of the presents). Going to the family dinner at my grandparents' house, where they had Christmas music playing, and that was always the first time of the year that we *heard* Christmas music; it wasn't playing on the radio for weeks and months before. Going to the candlelight service at church, sometimes two or three services that night, and they all felt different. When else did we get to go to *church at night*? Watching *The Grinch* and *A Christmas Story* on tv back when that was the only time of the year that you got to see it. This night just *felt* different. There was an energy in the air. Everyone was a little nicer. There was this feeling, especially as a kid, that something *good* was about to happen.

And at the same time, this time of year (and this *night*) also held a certain amount of *fear* for me. Because every year, as I walked into the sanctuary, they handed me one of these awful little candles with the paper disk around it that was *supposed* to stop the hot wax from dripping down onto my hands, but *never did*. I was *terrified* of getting hot wax on my hands. It was probably an irrational fear, and I've gotten a lot better about it over the years, like how getting a shot seems to hurt more as a kid than it does as an adult. But rational or not, I absolutely *hated* these candles. Because even as a child I knew that when the lights are out, and everything is still and quiet, and you're singing *Silent Night* next to your parents, and that hot wax

starts to drip down onto your hands, *you cannot make a sound*. You just have to suck it up and *deal with it*.

But also, there was always this *deeper* fear within me, this lingering question of *Was I good enough? Am I on the naughty list or the nice list? What about that fight I got in at school? What about the lies I told or that baseball card I stole from my friend? What about the curse words I said to my brother? What if I don't get this present that I was really hoping for? What if Santa doesn't even come? Do Santa and Jesus really see everything?* In the days and weeks leading up to Christmas, my excitement was always tempered with a little bit of fear.

I was reading something recently on the power of fear in our lives, and the list of things that people are afraid of is just staggering. I found one list that has over 500 medically diagnosed fears. Some of them are familiar or understandable ones. There is Acrophobia, the fear of heights. Many people have Glossophobia, the fear of speaking in public. Other fears are a little more strange, a little more difficult to imagine or understand. There is Arachi-butyro-phobia, the fear of peanut butter sticking to the roof of your mouth. Alektorophobia, the fear of chickens. Metrophobia, which is a fear or hatred of poetry. Some fears are religious in nature. Ecclesiophobia is a fear of the church. Homilophobia is a fear of sermons. Some fears are just ironic. There is Sesqui-peda-lophobia, which is a fear of long words. And Phobophobia, a fear of phobias.

One of our kids has a friend who is afraid of *cheese*. Not just that he doesn't *like* cheese. He is legitimately *afraid* of it. I have never understood that, but we always order an extra pizza without cheese on it. And every year at the mall, you will inevitably see kids who are afraid of Santa Claus, which I guess is known as *Claus-trophobia*. We may laugh at these because some of them seem so unbelievable, but for many people, these are very *real, crippling* fears that end up dictating how they live their lives.

We all have things that we are afraid of. Some of them are *surface* things like spiders and cheese. Some of them are much deeper. The fear of failure, the fear of being alone, the fear of not being loved or accepted. The fear of something happening to our kids or loved ones. The fear of violence and mass shootings. The fear of death. The fear of *each other*, especially people who are *different* than us – people who *look* different or *sound* different or *believe* differently than we do. There are *so many* things that we are afraid of. What are *you* afraid of?

There was a lot of fear surrounding the birth of Jesus. King Herod's fear that this child who would be born King of the Jews would threaten his power and rule. Mary's fear that being an unwed teenage mother would result in her physical or social death. Joseph's fear of public humiliation because his soon-to-be wife is having a baby that is not *his*. And the shepherds' fear, as they are sitting out in a field watching their sheep on a still, quiet night, when all of a sudden an army of angels fills the sky, singing praises to God. And every single time, the first thing that the angels *say* to Mary and Joseph and the shepherds is, "Do not be afraid." Because they *were*. And it's not like they just became magically *unafraid* when the angels said that to them. Like, "Oh, okay. The angel said *do not be afraid*, so I'm just not afraid anymore!" They had to *work through* their fear before they were able to embrace the good news of the coming of Christ.

We live in times that are no less fearful than theirs. How can *we* work through our fears to embrace the good news of the coming of Christ? Where do we find *hope* in the midst of our fear?

There's a funny thing about the word *hope*. When the New Testament talks about hope, it uses the Greek word *elpis*. And *elpis* can mean two very different things. It can mean, "the expectation of *good*," or it can mean, "the expectation of *evil*." It depends on the context. The expectation of *good* is *hope*. The expectation of *evil* is *fear*. When you are expecting something bad to happen, that is *fear*. What this word

shows us is that *hope* and *fear* can *both* be present at the same time. The *difference* is in what you are *expecting*. And that's where hope is most powerful – when you are faced with the prospect of something *bad*, but in the midst of that, you are holding on to the expectation of something *good*.

Hope is the *possibility* of good news, not the *reality* of it. *Hope* is not about what *is*. It is about what *could be*. Mary does not *know* that Joseph is going to believe her when she says this child is from God. She has no *proof* of that. But she is *holding on* to that possibility. Joseph does not *know* that Mary has not been unfaithful to him. He has no *proof* of that. But he is *holding on* to that possibility. The shepherds do not *know* that they are actually going to find a baby in a manger. They have no *proof* of that. And even if they *do*, they have no proof that this baby is going to grow up to be the Messiah. But they go to see anyway, because they are *holding on* to that possibility.

Hope does not ignore the possibility of the *bad*. It just holds on to the possibility of the *good*. It's all about what we *want* to be true, what we *need* to be true, and what we choose to hold on to. What did Mary and Joseph and the shepherds *need* to be true? Whatever it was, *that* is what they held on to in the midst of their fear. What do *we* need to be true, because that is what *we* will hold on to in the midst of *ours*?

What this night invites us to do is hold on to the possibility of the *good news* that “to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” “He will save his people from their sins.” “And they shall name him *Emmanuel*, which means *God is with us*.”

The central message of Christmas, the central message of *our faith* is this: *Do not be afraid*, because *God is with you*.

In the birth of Jesus, God has become human. The creator of the world has become a *part* of our world, of our *lives*. In the birth of Jesus, we are shown that God loves us so much, God cares about us so much, that God became one of us, to live life with us. In the birth of Jesus, God has made a promise to us that we are not alone; that God is with us, at work in this world and in our lives to bring about healing and peace and joy and love and life.

The same words that were spoken by angels to Mary and Joseph and shepherds 2,000 years ago are still being spoken to us tonight. *Do not be afraid.*

Though the world around us is filled with hatred and suffering and injustice, *do not be afraid*, because God is with us.

Though a medical diagnosis has shaken your life, *do not be afraid*, because God is with us.

Though a relationship has been strained or broken, and it seems so scary and hard to seek or extend forgiveness, *do not be afraid*, because God is with us.

Though an addiction seems so impossible to break free from, *do not be afraid*, because God is with us.

Though you look at the finances, and you have no idea how any of this is going to work out, *do not be afraid*, because God is with us.

Though you feel alone, do not be afraid, because God is with us.

And though we face an unknown and uncertain future, *do not be afraid*, because unto you this night, a child is born who is working the future for good and making all things, even us, new.

Christmas is our promise that God is with us, and that while there will be times when we are afraid, our fears do not have to dictate how we live our lives, because the promise of God's presence and love is more powerful than *any* of our fears. Hold on to that promise; to the possibility of something *good*; to the *expectation* that it is coming. Because tonight, *anything* is possible, *especially* something good.