

Do not be afraid!

Luke 2:10–11 But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.”

In the name of the Christ-child born to save us, dear fellow redeemed,

For the past few weeks I’ve been following with some interest the way people greet one another at this time of the year. For example, I’ve noticed that if I say to a store clerk, “Merry Christmas!” the clerk is usually quite ready to echo my greeting: “A Merry Christmas to you!” If, on the other hand, I say nothing, then it’s quite a different story. Some clerks will ignore the season, simply saying as they usually do: “Thanks” and “Goodbye.” While others will attempt some sort of politically correct greeting such as: “Happy Holidays!” or “Seasons Greetings!” Of course, as you know, political correctness taken to the extreme can sound rather ridiculous as proven by this “Christmas” card greeting I ran across the other day: *Please accept with no obligation, implied or implicit, my best wishes for an environmentally conscious, socially responsible, low stress, gender neutral, celebration of the winter solstice holiday, practiced within the most enjoyable traditions of the religious or secular persuasion of your choice...*

A rather strange greeting, wouldn’t you say? And yet I submit to you it’s not nearly as strange as the very first Christmas greeting ever – spoken by the angel to those shepherds keeping watch over their flock by night. The heavenly visitor didn’t wish those men a Merry Christmas, or happy holidays or even season’s greetings. Do you remember what he said? His rather odd salutation will serve as our theme today: **“Do not be afraid!”**

Yes, that is a strange Christmas greeting. But I’m guessing all of us understand why the angel said what he did. Put yourself in the sandals of any one of those shepherds – out there, in what I imagine to be a rather dark Judean night, when suddenly a creature from heaven appears on the scene, glowing with the glory of the Lord. Luke tells us those shepherds were “terrified.” We would be too – not just “startled” like we are when someone sneaks up on us. We’d be scared out of our wits. Why?

The answer to this question is found in the beautiful garden our God made for our first parents, Adam and Eve. In the beginning those first two people lived in perfect harmony with God. He was a welcomed guest in their home. But in that instant when they put their trust in Satan instead of God, all of that changed. Adam and Eve changed. Their rebellion ruined them and their relationship with God. Their sin shattered their peace and joy. It filled them instead with fear and dread so that when God came calling, they hid from him, knowing that any encounter with his holiness would bring the instant death their sin deserved.

Adam and Eve have passed their guilt along to every member of the human race. Each succeeding generation has inherited their sin and with it a natural terror of holy God. This is the horror those shepherds experienced on that first Christmas night as they came face to face with the glory of God reflected in his angelic messenger. The shepherds’ sin and guilt brought them to one conclusion: “God has come to destroy us.”

You and I have never encountered God's glory as those shepherds did, but we have known their fear. The same unholy dread of God fills our hearts by nature and proves that we too have inherited Adam's sin with its curse of death. This is the fear that grips us when troubles and heartaches enter our life. We lose our job or we get sick. Our marriage falls apart or a loved one dies. We are estranged from our family or a longtime friend. One thing goes wrong after another: the roof leaks, the furnace fails, the car breaks down. Whatever problems might come, they all lead us to the same conclusion, God is doing this to us to get even with us. We may get angry and raise our fist to heaven, but even as we do so, we sense how futile it all is. God isn't about to be intimidated by me and my threats. The truth is, if he wants to, he can squash me like a bug. And, oh, he wants to. Or so I imagine – of course he must want to – because of my sin.

The church's great reformer Martin Luther, once suffered from this same delusion until God's grace led him to see the foolishness of trying to figure out the mind of God. Luther wrote: *"Therefore when we are embattled against the Law, sin, and death in the presence of God, nothing is more dangerous than to stray into heaven with our idle speculations, there to investigate God in His incomprehensible power, wisdom, and majesty..."*¹ In other words, when we sinners try to imagine what God is like, when we try to guess what he's up to in our lives, we will jump to the wrong conclusion every time because we will always decide that such a holy, powerful God lives to treat us as our sins deserve. But nothing could be further from the truth. How can we be sure? Because God hasn't left us to guess what he's like. Instead he has told us. Better yet he has shown us. He did right from the start!

Already in Eden God promised that an offspring of the woman would crush the devil's head and so break Satan's grip on all those he took captive by his lies and deception. Through the thousands of years that followed, God repeated his promise again and again as he put into place all the pieces of his saving plan. Then, at last, his angel interrupted the shepherds' work with this urgent message: God's promise has been kept! **"Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord."** (Luke 2:10-11).

You see, there's no reason for us to stray into heaven, as Luther put it, with our idle speculation. We don't have to spend our days trying to imagine what God is like and what he intends to do to us. None of this is necessary. Why? Because God came here to reveal himself to us in the person of the Christ-child. Martin Luther loved to say that theology – the study of God – begins in the manger. He once wrote: *"Take hold of God as Scripture instructs you...begin where Christ began...in the manger...For this purpose Christ came down, was born, lived among men, suffered, was crucified, and died, so that in every possible way he might present himself to our sight."*² This is the purpose of Christmas!

In the Garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve were rightly terrified of God, he took away their fear by promising Christmas. In the fields of Bethlehem, when the shepherds were rightly afraid of God's glory, the angel took away their fear by announcing Christmas. As often as we are afraid of God's righteous anger, God comes to us in Word and sacrament to take away our fear by reminding us of Christmas: **"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."** (John 3:16-17).

Christian, this is how you know God and his intentions. Do not be afraid! God is not out to "get you." Look at his Christmas gift to you. He sent his Son, not to punish you for your sin, but to save you from it. In the person of this child whose birth we celebrate, our holy God himself took on our

flesh and blood to become one of us. He did this so that he could live as our perfect Substitute and offer himself as our perfect sacrifice. God came as our fellow human being so that he could serve as our stand-in under God's wrath to claim our sin and all our punishment. As one who is fully human, our God, Jesus, could and did die in our place and then rose from the grave to prove that we too will live even though we die. Don't you see? Christmas is the end of all fear. By taking away the guilt of our sin, Jesus has taken away any reason we might have to be afraid of God or anything else.

So tell me, what should you fear? Poverty? Loneliness? Illness? Death? Only if you still somehow imagine that God is against you. But he's not. He can't be. Christmas proves it. It proves he's with us. It proves he's for us. St. Paul says it so well: **"He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?"**³⁸ **I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers,**³⁹ **neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."** (Romans 8:32, 38-39).

Paul, like the angel, reminds us that the Baby born to save us is none other than Christ the Lord, the ruler of heaven and earth. In other words, our Savior has all the power he needs to make sure that nothing on earth or in hell will interfere with his plan to make and keep us his forever! That's all we need to know. We may never understand why we have the particular problems and troubles we do – why they have come at this or that time and last this or that long. What we do know is that they cannot be a punishment from God. In fact because of Christmas, because of who Jesus is and what he has done, we can be sure that our troubles and problems will cause us no lasting harm. In fact, by God's own promise, because of Christmas all troubles, each problem, and every heartache must actually and always serve our good till we are safe at last in heaven.

Is it any wonder then that the angel greeted those shepherds the way he did? "Do not be afraid!" How I like those words! But realizing that they will never replace the more common greetings of this season, please know that I am wishing you not just a day, not just a lifetime, but an eternity of peace and joy when I say, "A very blessed Christmas to you and yours," for Jesus' sake." Amen.

¹ Luther, M. (1999). *Luther's works, vol. 26: Lectures on Galatians, 1535, Chapters 1-4.* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.) (Vol. 26, pp. 28–29). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

² Ibid.