

“Do Not Be Afraid”

a sermon by

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Texts: “But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see – I bring you good news of great joy for all people.’” (Luke 2:10)

My daughter Lucy, who teaches High School English at St. Stephen/St. Agnes School in Alexandria, Virginia, called me some weeks ago to tell me about a new course she was asked to teach. It was a special class of three males, all athletes, all who needed an English course to graduate. This was her dilemma. How was she going to find a course to teach that would capture the attention of these three male teenage athletes?

She finally decided to teach a course that she entitled “Monsters in Literature.” It had to do with the way that almost every culture has invented these monsters, these creatures of chaos that seems to be a part of every human culture. Today, of course, the rage is on vampires and there are a number of movies and television programs that demonstrate our fascination with the “undead.”

But this is not something that we discovered. In the Old Testament we find a great “sea monster” (Leviathan). In the New Testament there are stories of demon possession. In one of the narratives in the New Testament, Jesus cast out demons from a man and the demons possessed a herd of swine that cast themselves off a cliff.

This interest in “monsters” was present in the ancient Greek and Roman societies. There are stories of the Cyclops, these one-eyed giants that inhabit the works of Homer, Virgil and Euripides. There is the Greek legend of Medusa, the Greek woman whose hair was a mass of snakes and at the sight of whom the person viewing her would turn to stone.

Psychiatrists, psychologists, and sociologists have understood for some time that these “monsters” are projections of our fears. Sometimes these are sociological in nature. In one of the classic horror films of the 1950’s all the evil monsters were black people and all the good people were white. Clearly, this movie was motivated by racial fears.

But most of these monsters have to do with a very basic human emotion – the fear of death and dying.

I.

In the birth of Jesus, Luke tells us that when the Christ child was born, there was a group of shepherds keeping watch over their flocks at night.

This would have been common phenomena in the hillside of Judea. This was an agrarian and nomadic region. There were hosts of shepherds who tended flocks of sheep by day and night.

But this was no ordinary night. Luke tells us that an angel appeared to a group of shepherds and that the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were terrified.

The first words that the angel spoke were the words “Do not be afraid.”

Let’s face it. There is something terrifying about coming face to face with an angel. Nor is this the first time these words are uttered in the Gospel of Luke. These are the words that the angel spoke to Zechariah, when he found out that his wife would conceive a child in her old age (Luke 1:13). They were the same words that the angel spoke to Mary, when Mary found out that she was to conceive a son, born of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:30)

This sense of fear is found throughout the New Testament. When Jesus’ disciples saw him walking on the water on the Sea of Galilee, we read that they were afraid. And when the women came to the tomb on that Easter morning, they met another angel who said to them, “Do not be afraid.”

So, as I read the story of the birth of Jesus there are two aspects of this narrative that bear our attention.

II.

The first is that this Jesus who is born is Christ, the Messiah. “Unto you is born this day in the city of David,” announces the angel to the shepherds “is a Savior who is Christ the Lord.”

There is something quite remarkable in the way that Luke presents the birth of Christ. In Matthew’s gospel the birth of Christ is quite regal. In Matthew’s gospel the Wise Men are kings. They are gentile rulers who come bearing expensive gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

But Luke tells the birth of Jesus in a much different way. In Luke’s gospel the angel appears to “shepherds.”

Luke is clear about this. When the Christ Child was born, it was not in a palace, but in a stable in an inn. The news is not announced to Caesar Augustus or even King Herod, but to a group of simple shepherds, who represented one of the poorest groups in Israel’s society.

This is a theme that emerges throughout Luke’s gospel: a prodigal son, a Good Samaritan, a dishonest steward. This is the gospel that Luke announces. The birth of Christ is for every man, woman, and child. But it is particularly for the outcast, for the lowly, the poor and the lonely.

III.

There is a second dimension to this announcement of the birth of the Christ Child. The angel announces 'a Savior, who is Christ the Lord'

On this point Luke and Matthew are in agreement. Matthew tells us that the child shall be called "Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins." (Matthew 1:18-25)

There are two aspects to the meaning of Christ as savior. The first is the forgiveness of sin. Dr. John Leith, shortly before his death, wrote in a letter to me, that the most serious problems facing our society today are not economic, social, or political. They are theological.

There is no more important question than the question of guilt and salvation. Is there some power in the world that enables each of us as a human being to overcome the dominance of instinct and impulse and the corruption of instinct and impulse by our own self-interests?

The birth of Jesus tells us that God has entered the world to deliver us from the power of sin.

The second note that is sounded in Luke's announcement of the birth of the Christ is to affirm that Christ has taken away the sting of death.

Again, Luke does this in a very subtle way. He mentions that at the birth of Jesus, Mary took her son, wrapped him in cloths, and laid him in a manger.

When I read those words, they struck a familiar chord with me. For just as Matthew's story of Herod's attempt to kill the infant Jesus previews the attempt by Herod's son to kill Jesus, so Luke gives us a hint of another threefold, deliberate phrasing in the Greek that after Jesus was crucified "they wrapped him in a linen cloth, placed him in a tomb, where no one had been laid." (Luke 23:53)

Today we celebrate the news of the angel's announcement. "For to you is born this day in the City of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

It is this child that has overcome sin and death.

And so we join with the church through the ages and proclaim, "Hallelujah, the Lord God omnipotent reigneth."

Amen.