

Rejoice!
Matthew 1: 18-25

C. S. Lewis once observed: “In Scripture the visitation of an angel is always alarming; it has to begin by saying, ‘Fear not.’”

Lewis probably had in mind the scripture reading for today and for other Sundays in Advent and Christmas. ...*an angel of the Lord appeared to [Joseph] in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife...*

Or earlier, at the Annunciation recorded in Luke: *In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary...The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God...”*

And of course, at the birth of Jesus, also in Luke: *In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people.”*

What is it about the appearance of an angel from God that would make someone’s reaction be fear, so that first off, the angel has to say, Do not be afraid? No doubt the strangeness of it, maybe the suddenness. Or maybe it was that the God of the Old Testament - which is the God the New Testament writers were still most familiar with – maybe it was that God was primarily a God of judgment and wrath, a strong warrior God, a God whose power was to be feared.

But the coming of Jesus into the world would change the emphasis from a God of judgment to a God of forgiveness and love. Not that judgment would disappear, not that human beings could do whatever they want with no concern for consequences. Angels would play their part in announcing judgment, too, especially in the book of Revelation. But the love of God for the world and forgiveness of the human being prevail over the sinful condition we are in and the sins which we commit.

So the angel's first words – “Fear not”- serve to announce that change. They are the hinge words that open the door onto a whole new relationship between God and human beings through the coming of Jesus Christ, God's own son. Do not be afraid.

At the beginning of Advent, we offered to you a little booklet of table prayers. (There are still lots left, and even though we are at the fourth Sunday of Advent, you may want to take one with you. They'll be available on the table during coffee hour after the service.)

We've been using this booklet to guide the lighting of the candles on the Advent wreath. The Prophets' Candle beckoned us to listen for the voice of God. The Bethlehem Candle urged us to prepare to receive the Word made flesh. The Shepherds' Candle encouraged us to behold the presence of God with us. And now today, the Angels' Candle invites us to rejoice in the gift of Jesus the Christ. The candle we lit today is the pink one, the candle of joy.

The angels of God turn us from fear to rejoicing. The prayer on page 25 says it so well:

The first message of your messenger angel, Lord, was “fear not.” And as I try to decipher that message, I ask myself, what is the opposite of fear? Is it confidence? Is trust a better word? Whichever I choose, the result is JOY. As I look at the growing light of the wreath, I can see that darkness (a typical cause of fear) truly is being driven away. Let that be a sign to me, O Lord – a sign to rejoice!

Certainly, Mary and Joseph would have had good cause to be afraid after hearing the angel’s message to each of them. God had caused them to be put into a shameful situation in the society and culture of that time. The text reads *...Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child... Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.*

Then follows Joseph’s dream, in which he was reassured by the angel that the child to be born was conceived by the Holy Spirit and that this child, whom Joseph would name Jesus, would save God’s people from their sins. Now, we do not read that Joseph jumped for joy in his dream when he heard these words. Nor did he exclaim anything excitedly when he woke up. Rather, simply and quietly, *he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife...*

Joseph’s joy was a deep internal joy, a joy that comes from knowing that even though things might not seem to be going so well at any given moment, you are doing what you have been called to do.

Confident in your relationship with God, you move forward day by day, rejoicing in a simple and quiet way that God is bringing you salvation.

Here is a good place to recall the passage from the prophet Isaiah which Ben read. For Christians over the centuries, this passage, along with others from Isaiah, has been taken to prophesy the coming of Christ.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
those who live in a land of deep darkness – on them has light shined.
You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy;
For a child has been born for us, a son given to us;

The angels of God turn fear into rejoicing. I wonder how many of you have ever experienced an angel. I know I have, several times. A hand on the shoulder, just the right touch at just the right time. A word softly spoken – “I’m here if you need me.” Eye contact across a space of separation. A dream so real it was still with you when you came awake. A visit from an angel, these times. The Holy Spirit with you and you know it. You know it. And then, deep within, the warm feeling of joy.

So often an old familiar hymn captures what we want to say just the right way. Sing with me now the first and second verses of hymn #9. Maybe we’ll be hearing angels.

O come, O come, Emmanuel
And ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel!

O come Thou Dayspring, come and cheer
Our spirits by Thine advent here;
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
And death’s dark shadows put to flight.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel!

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