

Date: December 24, 2005

## **CHRISTMAS EVE**

**SERMON:** There Is No Fear in Love

Text(s): 1 John 4:1-18

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The Sunday School of a certain church had been hard at work for several weeks getting ready for their annual Christmas pageant. The children had all been assigned their appropriate roles in the story and had worked hard to memorize their lines; the Moms had been busy making costumes out of bathrobes and towels, colored fabric and Velcro. The teachers were despairing that it would ever come together in time, but as usual it did. And on Christmas Eve, the congregation gathered, all the parents and grandparents to watch and applaud, and all the teen-agers in the balcony to laugh and snicker at the little kids doing what they themselves had done just a few years before.

One little seven year-old boy had been chosen to play the angel Gabriel. He only had one line to say, so his part was an easy one. He was to enter from stage left, and swoop across the stage to where the little girl playing the part of Mary was sitting, and say in an angelic-sounding voice, "It is I, be not afraid." So he had practiced on his mother at home, he had practiced on his friends at school, he had practiced with his dog. He practiced saying it a hundred different ways and tried to make his voice sound big and deep. He knew his line cold: "It is I, be not afraid." "It is I, be not afraid."

But as the pageant began, and he stood backstage, waiting in the wings for his grand entrance, he got that fluttery feeling in his stomach that most performers get before going onstage. He could see out through the curtain to all the people sitting there in the church, and he was going to have to go out there and stand in front of God and all of those people, and he decided that perhaps he would rather be something else, ANYTHING else but an actor, and he was about to turn around and flee, when his cue came. His teacher who was standing

beside him, and was reading the look of panic on his face, took him by the shoulders and gave him a somewhat more than gentle shove, and propelled him out on the stage. . . where he stood absolutely petrified with fear. He looked at all those people, he struggled to remember what it was he was supposed to say, and finally, in a spasm of mortification, he blurted out in a high-pitched squeak, "It's only me, and I'm scared to death!"

As I've read and heard the Christmas story over the years, one of the things that always strikes me is how many people in the story were afraid. The misty romanticism with which we surround the story, some of which is present even in our gospel narratives, is largely the result of pious religious imagination. Over the centuries, it has taken on that "once upon a time" sort of quality. The nativity scenes with which we decorate our houses or the pageants we put on with children at church always emphasize the serenity of shepherds abiding in quiet, moonlit fields, while choirs of angels sing about peace on earth, and we imagine that the scene in the stable of Bethlehem was a picture postcard of pastoral tranquillity and calm. Just about everyone's favorite Christmas carol is "Silent Night, holy night! All is calm, all is bright."

Somehow, I doubt that all was calm and bright for any of the characters in St. Luke's story of the first Christmas, at least not until after the child was born and everyone would breathe normally again. In the beginning part of the story which we have not read this evening, the terrified father of John the Baptist is greeted by an angelic messenger with the words, "Fear not." When Gabriel appears to Mary to announce to her the joyful news that she will give birth, he greets her, "Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you. Fear not." Luke tells us that Mary was "greatly unsettled" by this greeting, which is, I would guess, a massive understatement. When the angels appear to the shepherds tending their flocks, their first words to the paralyzed shepherds, are "Do not be afraid."

I don't think that those words are only

meant to allay the fears of an encounter with divine messengers, thought that's part of it. But what prospective parents aren't beset with anxiety and fear at the onset of labor pains? Even prospective grandparents, as I and many others of us can testify. What birth of what baby anywhere in the world is a peaceful event, free from anxiety? The onset of labor, the pain, the rush to get to the birthing place, the anxiety of waiting—all these would give anyone cause for being scared to death. I'd be very surprised if Mary and Joseph weren't afraid that night, particularly in view of the fact that they were uprooted from their hometown to travel back to Joseph's ancestral village for the tax census, and were, to all intents and purposes, homeless, without shelter when Mary's labor began. I'm fairly certain, if I know anything about human nature, that Mary and Joseph and the shepherds and anyone else involved with them that night were feeling more than a bit afraid.

Fear is very much a part of our lives most of the time, isn't it? From the fear of monsters under our bed when we're small to the anxiety of leaving home for college or our first job when we join the adult world. We know fear when a friendship or our marriage starts to unravel and we don't quite know what to do about it; we feel afraid when a loved one is seriously ill and may die. And when a beloved spouse or partner or parent dies, we're afraid when we wonder how we're going to get on with life.

I'd guess that if we were brave enough to be really honest, we'd all probably confess that there are many times when we feel like blurting out the line of that little fellow in the Christmas pageant; "It's only me, and I'm scared to death." To be human is to be afraid. There is probably no more universal human experience than fear. Except, perhaps, love.

Our need to love and be loved is at least as universal as our experience of fear. Many of you know that my wife Carol teaches English-as-a-second-language in the Augusta school system.

This past week, as she was helping one of her little Chinese boys prepare his oral report on dinosaurs, several 10-year-olds were sitting around another table working on a craft project and chattering among themselves as children do. Carol wasn't paying much attention to their conversation until Jenya, from Russia, said, "I think Mrs K will glad when we leave [because we're so noisy]."

Kim, whose parents were teenaged refugees from Cambodia, replied, "Oh no, she won't, Mrs. K loves us, don't you Mrs. K?"

Carol tuned in a little more at that point and said, "Yep. That's right."

At that, Kim looked up and pumped her fist and exclaimed, "Yes! I am loved!"

Love is the universal antidote to the universal human experience of fear. When we know we are loved, our fears can never get the best of us. If there is any enduring meaning to be found in this highly romanticized story of a child born in Bethlehem 2000 years ago, it is just here in this very human experience of living between fear and love. Listen to the words of St. John, *"Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. . . If we love one another, God lives in us, and God's love is perfected in us. There is no fear in love, for perfect love casts out fear."*

There is no fear in love. This is not the simplistic sort of love that is often sung about in romantic popular songs, *What the World Needs Now, Is Love, Sweet Love.* This is not a sentimental feeling or a wishful romantic notion. It is at once the most mysterious, most profound, most difficult, most costly, and yet the simplest of all truths. God is love. God is love. Everything begins from that one ultimate truth. The foundations of the universe are built upon those three words. The planets move in their

orbits, the stars blaze forth in their galaxies, the giant sequoias stand tall in their splendor, the wild geese wing their flights unerringly overhead, a baby smiles at her mother, a couple commit themselves to their lifelong project of building a home, the gray-haired senior discovers wisdom and acceptance in old age all from that single point of origin. God is love. God is love. Like a drumbeat it echoes through the infinity of time and space and human history.

An old hymn says it well:

*Could we with ink the oceans fill,  
And were the skies of parchment made,  
Were every reed on earth a quill,  
And everyone a scribe by trade,  
To write the love of God above  
Would drain the oceans dry.  
Nor would the scroll contain the whole,  
Though stretched from sky to sky.*

And this love, in which all of us have our being, is revealed in that most fundamental of all human experiences, the birth of a baby. In the darkest of times, in the most fearful circumstances, the birth of a child is a sign of hope, of the future. This is the reason why everyone celebrates the birth of a child. It is a sign that life is always stronger than death. Love is creative, it generates life.

To those who have trained the eyes of their hearts to see it, the birth of a child is also a sign of God's faithfulness to the covenant God made with the human race. The birth of a child is a sign, not only of our family's future, but it holds within it the possibility of the whole world's future.

Perhaps that's why God chose to come among us in just this way—not with the fanfare of imperial trumpets, nor with a grand parade down Broadway, but in the poverty, pain, humility, fear, and glory of the birth of a baby. The Christmas story, romanticized as we have

made it, nevertheless has the power to drive out our fears when we attend to it, to see what really is there to see—a sign that God is still with us, even in the night of human fear. In the cry of every newborn child, when we open our ears to hear it and our eyes to see it, that sign of Everlasting Love is repeated. “Yes, we are loved!” And there is no fear in love. To us, a child is born.