

## “Be Not Afraid! The Baby Means Change!”

Luke 2: 8-20; Zephaniah 3: 16-17

Our text for today probably is one of the most well-known moments of the Bible and right there in the center of the story is “Be Not Afraid!” This “Be Not Afraid” is said to a group of shepherds right before the angel tells them the good news that “unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord”.

As I have lived with this text this past week, I have wondered what was there really for the shepherds to fear. Sure, I get, angels popping out of the dark sky is not an everyday occurrence but really what did the shepherds have to fear anyway?

They could have easily ignored the good news shared with them that night and kept living life like they had always done, life on the margins, never really welcomed or embraced. The shepherds that night could have easily pretended that the angelic vision was caused by something that they ate and kept on tending the sheep. But they didn't. We are told that after the angels left them, they made haste to Bethlehem to see the newborn baby.

They had a choice: The shepherds could have easily ignored the good news and kept on tending the sheep or they could go and see what the good news was really all about. They had a choice: live in fear or open themselves to the possibilities of the Kingdom of God.

I realized as I was pondering the shepherds' choice that as a person of faith, I have been asking the wrong questions all along. Instead of asking, in that moment, what did the shepherds really fear, what I should be asking is in that moment, how had the love of God changed their lives in life-giving, life transforming ways?

Let me explain: As we may know, at that time, shepherds were considered outcasts. They were not really welcomed in polite society or really even in any society. They lived life on the margins, never really welcomed or accepted. But in that moment, a newborn baby changed all that. Love came down and transformed them from outcasts into welcomed guests. No longer pushed to the margins but welcomed to the Table. No longer living in darkness but restored and renewed by God's love. No longer afraid but embraced as Beloved children of God.

In that moment, everything changed. Their eyes were opened. Their hearts were rejoicing. The Kingdom of God had burst upon them and calmed their fears

with God's love. In that moment, everything changed. No longer were they outcasts but now seen as welcomed guests.

The shepherds had nothing to lose by going to Bethlehem and meeting this baby. But instead, had everything to gain-just by showing up and entering into the story of God's love. And it all started with coming of a newborn baby, born in the city of David, who was the Messiah, the Lord.

It all started because the baby brings change in life giving and life transforming ways. The baby brought change for the shepherds that night, change that this world, change that the outcasts, the poor and the lonely, change that the powerful and mighty, change that we as people of faith so desperately need right now. This newborn baby, born in the city of David, who was the Messiah, the Lord, brought change that night and continues to bring change each and every day, change that we are invited to participate in just by showing up and entering into God's story of love.

Here's why I say this. I'm not sure that we preacher types have been doing our job quite right. We have been using phrases like "Faith is risky" or "Faith is a gamble" but really it's not, especially when I look at this story, a story that transformed outcasts into welcomed guests, a story that calms our fears with the power of God's love.

I'm going to let everyone in on a secret...Are you listening because you don't want to miss it? It is not risky to believe and trust in God. It is not a gamble to believe and trust in God. I'll admit that practicing what we preach-the Gospel message calls us to act and relate to others in ways that might be counter-cultural. It can also call us to act in ways that require us to take a stand in difficult situations. But we can do that...because we know faith in God is not risky. Faith in God is not a gamble.

Faith in God is a sure thing because God has taken all the risks for us. We have nothing to fear. God has taken all the risks for us. We don't have to look any farther than this story, this story of God's love, this story where love drives out fear, this story where God acts because a broken and hurting world is not what God intended when God created the world. We don't have to look any farther than this story to know that God has taken all the risks when God transformed and continues to transform our world, when we experience that many ways God's love calms our fears.

The angels' words tell us all we need to know about the real risk God took when God came into this broken and hurting world. God took a huge risk by coming into this world as a baby, vulnerable and weak, born to a peasant girl and poor carpenter. When we look at the angels' words to the shepherds, when we hear their call to not be afraid, when the angels tell the shepherds of a baby born in

Bethlehem, wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger, we realize what a huge risk God took just by coming and to dwell among us. God's story of love is all about risk but not our risks. It is about God's risks when God decided to be in relationship with us. God's story of love is a story about the risks God took that night and continues to take each and every day transforming outcasts into welcomed guests.

God knew the shepherds had a choice just like God knows we have a choice now. We can either live in darkness, ignore God's love, pretend it doesn't have the power to transform our world or...or we can open ourselves up to the possibilities of the Kingdom of God. We can open our hearts to the life giving ways of God's grace. We can experience how God's love does calm all our fears and be transformed into the people God created us and calls us to be.

We have a choice. We have nothing to lose by going to Bethlehem and seeing this newborn baby. Actually instead...we have everything to gain just by showing up and entering into God's story of love.

People of God, Be Not Afraid! This newborn baby brings change. This newborn baby is change. This newborn baby means change, change that this world is so desperately crying out for right now. And the most amazing thing is that we as the people of God are invited to participate in this change each and every just by

showing up and entering the redeeming, the renewing, the fear-calming story of God's love.

People of God, Be Not Afraid! This newborn baby is God made flesh, dwelling among us. We have nothing to fear and everything to gain. God's love has come and transformed our lives in life giving, life transforming, heart celebrating, life renewing ways. We have nothing to fear. God is here.

God has come to bring healing and wholeness to this broken and hurting world. God has come to dwell among us and create a whole new system because the way things are down here, the hurt and the hate, the loneliness and the hopelessness, the corrupt systems of power and might, are not what God intended when God created the world.

God took a risk that night and God will not stop taking risks until each and every one of us has been embraced and caught up in God's tremendous love", a love that takes away all our fears. God will not stop working, redeeming, renewing, calming all our fears until all of us, all of God's children have been transformed from outcasts into welcomed guests.

You see, God knows something we tend to forget or ignore. "Fear is like a poison. It is an ugly thing that can poison our lives and distract us from becoming the people God created us and calls us be." Just think about our world:

Fear is what's at the base of all our debates. Fear of missing out is what drives our consumerism. Fear of losing is what's actually making us lose the most. Unless we let love drive out fear, our fears will drive out love. Unless we let love rule our world, fear will always rule our world

Or as someone once told me, "Fear may sell policies or garner votes or hawk hardware, but it doesn't save. There is only one thing that has the power to set us free and that is God's love.

That's what the birth of Jesus does for us, does for the world. It releases us from our fears. It breaks the cycle of anxiety. It drives out fear because God took on all the risks when God became flesh and dwelt among us, when God came to teach us that there is another way.

As people of faith, we have nothing to fear by entering into the work of the Kingdom of God. As people of faith, we have nothing to fear by telling others of God's love and grace. As people of faith, we have nothing to fear by becoming the people that God created us and calls us to be

Because...because God took all the risk that night, being born in a stable. God took all the risk that day, dying on the cross. God took all the risk and overcame the grave. God showed us that no matter what, no matter how much the darkness threatens to overtake us, no matter how much the powers that be threaten

to silence us, no matter how much the brokenness and hurting of this world seems to be growing, God showed us we have nothing to fear. God came and dwelt among us. God showed us how love can truly drive out fear. God showed how love will always have the last word.

So people of God, do not be afraid. “It doesn’t matter what fear the world’s selling. Remember one thing. The Story, God’s story of Love, God’s story of grace, God’s story that transformed outcasts into welcomed guests, keeps repeating one phrase: Do Not Be Afraid.

Do not be afraid of the unknown when you know the One who does the impossible,

Do not be afraid of what could fail when God’s arms are stronger than any failure & *God cannot fail. God will not let you fall*

Do not be afraid of any darkness because greater is our God who is in the depths of you, our God who is breathing the wild courage to love right into your bones.

Greater is our God whose very love will renew us.

Do not ever be afraid of suffering because suffering sometimes can birth a greater resurrection.

Do not ever be afraid when it comes to the work of God’s peaceable Kingdom. God has taken all the risks and by doing so, showed us we have nothing to fear. God has shown us time and time again that love will always overcome.”

As humans, we tend to think that the opposite of love is hate but it is not. The opposite of love is fear. We see fear taking over our world more and more each day. The call of our time is love and it is needed now more than ever. Only

love will drive out fear. So People of God, don't be afraid to show and share God's love with all of God's children. God's love has the power to transform outcasts into welcome guests...just like it did for the shepherds all those years ago and just like it did for us when God first embraced us as God's own.

Don't be afraid...God's love will calm all our fears.

Recently several faith leaders wrote a letter of solidarity to our Muslim brothers and sisters. "The statement invited people to heed the call to action by using the hashtag #revolutionarylove on social media. One comment posted to the facebook post about the initiative demonstrates the power of God's love more than all the signatures of religious leaders combined by showing exactly how love can overcome all fear.

The post, written by a young man, simply said, "A man once looked at me wearing my turban and ran his thumb across his neck. "I'm going to slit your throat!" he screamed. I'm still praying for him, because he is my brother in this human race. His hate isn't powerful enough to make me hate him. In the face of such hatred, I choose love. It's as simple as that.

With God dwelling among us, with God leading us, with God as our Savior, born this day in the city of David, we, As people of faith, have nothing to fear. We have nothing to fear by entering into the work of the Kingdom of God. As people of faith, we have nothing to fear by telling others of God's love and grace. As people of faith, we have nothing to fear by becoming the people that God created

us and calls us to be. Because...because God has shown us time and time again that love will always overcome the darkness.

So people of God, do not be afraid. "It doesn't matter what fear the world's selling. We know that there is another way. We know that The Story, God's story of Love, God's story of grace, God's story that continues to transform outcasts into welcomed guests, keeps repeating one phrase: Do Not Be Afraid.

All Because the birth of a newborn baby, our God, Emmanuel, the birth of the promised Christ child has changed and will continue to change everything.

Thanks to be God! Amen.