

Do Not Be Afraid

*A sermon preached on Luke 2:1-20 on Christmas Eve, December 24, 2024,
by Emily Hull McGee with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

I.

Every year around this time, the internet seems to explode in an array of loudness: sales too good to pass up, houses too lit up to avoid, year-in-review hot takes too ubiquitous to ignore, TikToks too viral to miss. But each year, a Christmas story circulates online amidst all that noise, reminding all of us again about its quiet magic. You know it, I'm sure, some of you for nearly 60 years. For it was in December 1965 when cartoonist Charles Schultz put his beloved Charlie Brown and the whole gang on CBS for a Christmas special. Early reports from the network were mixed: too slow, the executives said. The kids' voices weren't dramatic enough. And who would want to mix jazz with Christmas music?¹

Thankfully the watching public paid them no mind. Over 50% of the country tuned in live (and remember – these were the days before streaming, no watching it later or recording it in advance!). They saw the familiar characters and enjoyed their quest to discover what Christmas is all about. Perhaps their hearts were also warmed when Linus begins to recite the Christmas story from Luke 2 as we've heard tonight. And I have to think that some in that viewing audience would have seen then what it took many of us an internet meme to realize: that right in the middle of the story, Linus drops his blanket.

That blanket is like Linus's logo. It's his whole brand. His trademark. He drags it everywhere, and no one – not even Charlie Brown! – can convince him to give it up. It is, quite literally, his safety blanket. Which makes it all the

¹ <https://schulzmuseum.org/reflections-on-a-charlie-brown-christmas/>

more remarkable to remember the exact moment he drops it. “And the angel of the Lord said,” Linus begins, “Fear not!” Suddenly his hands are free. The blanket pooled forgotten by his feet. “For behold I bring you good tidings of great joy.” Seems the good news of Christmas is what it takes to separate Linus from his fear.²

II.

Fear is where the Christmas story begins. Not with the lights or the hope, the traditions or the concerts, the sugarplums and the sugar cookies. Not even with a beautiful Sanctuary full of a beloved community on this holy night. Fear from an astonished Mary and Joseph, told by angels they would parent the coming Christ. Fear from the trembling shepherds, those first to hear the good news of a baby born in Bethlehem. Fear from the wise Magi, threatened by Herod’s conspiracy-laden madness as they followed a new star.

Yet to each, and hundreds more like them in scripture, and countless since, the word of God came again and again: *do not be afraid*. Do not be afraid! Fear not. To Zechariah. To Mary. To Joseph. To the shepherds. To the Israelites before Jesus was born and the disciples after Jesus died. Hundreds of times in the Bible, these words are given to God’s people, people whose terror came uniquely at the hands of a tyrant king, his violent soldiers, an impoverished living, a marginalized place in the landscape of things, and whose fear came universally in the worries about children and parents, food and shelter, security and stability, purpose and legacy.

III.

² Thanks to dear friend, Rev. Alan Sherouse, for his take on this story!

<https://fbcgso.wordpress.com/2015/12/24/hands-free-christmas-eve-sermon-from-alan-sherouse/>

We know those fears too, don't we? They show up in the bills we've gotta pay and the boundaries we maintain, the items on a list to check off and workouts to do, the career ladders to climb and a side hustle to optimize. They're in this trauma we lug around, that relationship that broke us, this grief that never leaves, that shame that silences. We're worrying about the minor things – *did Uncle Joe get my spouse the same present I did? Will we even make it through the holidays without talking politics?* – but also the substantial things. Worrying about our children and our aging parents. Anxious about this potential layoff in our company or that debt we just can't seem to get out from under. Distressed about this cancer scare or that creepy neighbor. Nervous about the past and the future. Unsettled by the unrelenting loneliness or the never-ending search for happiness. Unmoored by bombs in Gaza, and unrest in Syria, and despair in Ukraine, and hungry kids in East Winston. Wondering if our kids are safe at school, and will the economy collapse, and is there another pandemic around the corner, and will my rights be taken away, and can we even make it through. Fretting about the state of the world and the future of our existence.

Sometimes these fears are pronounced, specific, formed. (Hence the popularity of Ring cameras, guns, workaholism, and stockpiles of toilet paper to quell them!) Other times, our fear is nebulous, shrouding every corner of our living with just a sense, a vibe, a feeling we can't shake. It makes us turn in, and get defensive, and put up all the familiar shields, and hunker down. It separates us from each other, insulating and isolating us, cloistering us in comfortable corners, eroding our sense of trust and collective capacity. Sociologists tell us that with every passing year, our fears only grow and

sharpen.³ Fear becomes a motivator, driving the news and the tweets and the markets and our politics, shaping everything from our public policies to our personal rhythms.

Indeed, fear is so central to our human experience, it practically becomes our whole brand. Our trademark. The thing we drag everywhere. The very thing no one can convince us to give up. Our security blanket.

IV.

And then we find ourselves sitting in a warm church on a cold night. Hearing the old old story once again. Remembering that journey for a young couple traveling to Bethlehem as a baby stirred in Mary's womb. A night sky ripped wide open with angels singing amidst the call to not be afraid. No room in the inn. Animals surrounding a manger where the little lord Jesus came into the world. An enchanted father. A breathless mother, weary and wondrous. The swing of time that seemed suspended in mystery. The hopes and fears of all the years, blanketing us yet again.

But maybe – just maybe – we can hear the angels speaking to us. *Fear not*, they say. Don't be afraid. Yes, even you! These are Christmas words for sure, but they're living words. Courage words. Words of love come near from a God who can't bear to be far. They console us: *you don't have to live this way*. They challenge us: *unclutter all you hoard in your life to feel secure, and prepare room in your heart for Love to nestle in*. They conspire with us: *God's new dream is being born right here, right in the midst of all that makes you afraid*.

Do not be afraid, because God came close to dwell among us. *Fear not*, because that means all of us. Not just for the people who are the loudest or strongest, flashiest or fanciest; not just for those who have it all figured out or

³ <https://news.chapman.edu/2024/10/01/what-scares-you/#fear>

at least make it look like they do; not just for those in the rooms where decisions are made; not in the most powerful ways or most prominent places – but for every single creature: outcast and oppressor, marginalized and managers, retirees and refugees, queer and questioning, curious and cynical, hopeful and hateful, scholars and students, homeowners and homeless, wealthy and wanting. Every one – every single one – beloved fiercely and fully, no matter what.

How do we know? Well we know where to look: in the most vulnerable of places: the Holy with a brown baby face, refugee parents, a stable to call home, and nothing to their names but the gifts brought from those filled with wonder. Right here among us.

And why would God do such a thing? The only possible answer is love. Love so unconditional, it's scandalous. Love so complete, it's transformative. Love so amazing, it demands our heart, our soul, our very lives, our all.

There's a risk to take all of this in, of course, because when Jesus enters in, nothing remains the same. When we drop the blanket, we relinquish fears' hold on us: released from their grip, yet steadied by God's presence among them. When we welcome Jesus, we welcome those with him. When we prepare him room, we prepare for Love to sweep out the cobwebs of fear, and clear out the clutter of offense, and haul away the piles of resentment, and shake off the cloak of routine. As one preacher says, "When Christ comes into your heart, he comes to save you from all of that, from the tempting insularity of [modern] life, comes to make you vulnerable again, able to feel and care and weep and love. He comes to change you and to save your life."⁴

V.

⁴ John Buchanan, <https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2000/122400.html>.

Perhaps that's why God came near in a baby. God didn't **have** to do that, picking the most vulnerable way to dwell in the world. But God **did** do that. You might remember that babies are born with a soft spot on their heads, right there nestled between the plates of the skull to keep their heads pliable and able to enter the world. The largest of these soft spots is called a "fontanelle," a French word for fountain or spring, so named because the fontanelle pulses along with the baby's heart almost like a fountain. Every baby is born with a fontanelle. Even Jesus. Which means when God came to this world at the beginning as word and light, dwelling with the whole of creation, God came with a soft spot. Vulnerable. Exposed. Pliable. The divine heartbeat visible and flowing like a fountain.

We only have to look at Jesus' life to see what a vulnerable God looks like. He who released the captives and clothed the naked, he who healed the lepers and lifted up the lowly, he who dismantled the systems and turned over the tables, he who died a criminal's death and rose so that the world would know that death never has the final word – Jesus became God's dwelling way in this world, his soft spot unprotected, unsecured, unclenched so that we can be too; his soft spot, as my dear friend says, the only one in this world that never closed.⁵

Friends, my hope, my prayer, my yearning for each of us this year, is that through or despite it all, you hear the good news of great joy, good news that loosens your grip and frees your fears. Drop the blanket, friends. Free your hands from fear's grip. Let the good news of great joy enter in. For Christ is born again!

⁵ Grateful, always, for this image of the fontanelle, which was first shared with me by my dear friend, Scott Dickson, and eloquently imagined by my dear friend, Alan Sherouse. This note originated from Elizabeth Myer Boulton of the SALT Project.

<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2014/12/12/47e04sv2zkg1tm96m059obc026l8nb>