

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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The Relentless "Fear Not" in a Broken World

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I wonder if anyone else is struggling to get into the "Christmas spirit" this year. Maybe it's just me, but it feels harder than usual. Perhaps it's the personal burdens some of us carry: a recent loss, strained relationships, health concerns, financial stress. Or maybe it's the overwhelming brokenness we see when we open our phones or turn on the news.

We witness violence unfold in Gaza and the West Bank. We observe the grinding war in Ukraine continue. Sudan falls into chaos while the world looks away. Closer to home, we see poverty rising, families struggling to afford groceries, and a feeling that the systems meant to protect us are failing. The list of suffering seems endless, and amid all of that, we're supposed to find joy, peace, and goodwill.

But here's what I want you to understand: if you're feeling anxious, uncertain, or afraid this Advent season, you're not alone. Those shepherds in the fields? Terrified. Mary, told she would bear God's son? Afraid. Joseph, discovering his fiancée was pregnant? Scared. Zechariah, visited by an angel? So overwhelmed, he was struck mute. The Christmas story isn't about people who had it all together. It's about frightened, overwhelmed people encountering God in the middle of a broken world.

Luke's Gospel begins the nativity story not with angels or shepherds, but with politics: "In those days a decree went out from Emperor Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered."

Now, we might read that and think it's just historical scene-setting. But Luke's original audience would have heard something else entirely. Caesar Augustus was called "savior." His propaganda machine proclaimed that he brought "good news," *evangelion*, the *gospel*, to the world. Sound familiar? The Roman Empire deliberately used religious language to describe its emperor. Augustus had brought *Pax Romana*, the Roman Peace, and his birthday was celebrated as the beginning of "good tidings for the world."

But let's be honest about what that power looked like. It was built on military conquest. It was maintained through coercion and violence. And this census? It concerned taxation, the extraction of wealth from occupied territories to fund further conquest. The peace of Rome was the peace of the boot on the neck, the sword at the throat. It was power that possessed, controlled, and dominated.

And into that world, Luke drops a bombshell: while Caesar Augustus sits in his palace in Rome, the *true* king is being born in a backwater province, in a borrowed space, laid in an animal's feeding trough.

Do you see the contrast? The empire's power seeks to possess and control. But divine power? Divine power empties itself. Divine power doesn't demand a palace; it chooses a stable. Divine power doesn't lord over humanity; it joins humanity. While worldly power builds walls and armies, divine power tears down barriers and seeks reconciliation. While worldly power says, "You will serve me," divine power says, "I will serve you."

Let's talk about what this scene actually looked like, because I think we've sanitized it beyond recognition.

Our Christmas cards show a glowing Mary in pristine blue robes, a clean baby Jesus surrounded by adoring, well-groomed shepherds, and maybe a cute donkey in the corner. There's probably soft light, maybe a convenient star beam, and everyone looks peaceful and serene.

But friends, this was not that.

This was a teenage girl who had just traveled over 80 miles while nine months pregnant, on a donkey, on rough roads, and then gone into labor with no midwife, no familiar family, no hospital. And why had she undergone this perilous and draining journey in such a state? The threat of Roman violence. Hanging above all those travelers, like the sword of Damocles, was the Emperor's Decree. Mary was exhausted, disheveled, and probably still bleeding. The stable was dirty. It smelled like animals because it was *full of animals*. There was manure on the ground. The feeding trough they used as a crib likely still contained hay and animal saliva.

And those shepherds? They weren't the gentle figurines in our nativity sets. They were rough men who lived outdoors, who smelled like sheep, who had dirt under their fingernails and mud on their clothes. They showed up travel-stained and probably more than a little wild-eyed from their angelic encounter.

This wasn't Instagram-worthy. This was messy, uncomfortable, and undignified.

And here's the thing: *God chose this*. God didn't have to be born in a stable. God could have arranged for Mary to give birth in comfort, surrounded by servants and luxury. But God chose the muck and the mire. God chose to enter our world not at its most beautiful or presentable, but in all its raw, messy reality.

Why? Because God's love is stubborn and passionate and refuses to be put off by our dirt. God doesn't wait for us to clean ourselves up before showing up. God meets us in the mess.

Have you noticed how often angels have to say "Do not be afraid" in the Christmas story?

To Zechariah: "Do not be afraid." To Mary: "Do not be afraid." To Joseph in his dream: "Do not be afraid." To the shepherds: "Do not be afraid." It's almost comical how frequently it arises. Apparently, encountering the divine is terrifying, who knew?

But the angels don't just say "Don't be afraid" and leave it at that. They give the antidote to fear: *notice*. Pay attention. Look at what God is doing.

"I am bringing you good news of great joy," the angel tells the shepherds. "To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." And then: "This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."

Notice the baby. *See* what God is doing. The antidote to fear is not pretending everything is fine. It's not toxic positivity or wishful thinking. The antidote to fear is noticing the Word, the faithful and trustworthy good news, at work in the world around us.

So where is the Word working today? Where do we see God showing up?

We see it in simple acts: the neighbor who holds the door, the carolers who brave the cold to share music, the friend who offers a sympathetic ear when we need to vent. We see it in the heavier work: the EMTs who show up at 3 AM, the volunteers at the soup kitchen, the humanitarian workers in war zones who refuse to abandon the suffering.

We see God's Word in every act of kindness that refuses to be extinguished by darkness. In every person who chooses compassion when cynicism would be easier. In every moment when someone says, "I see you, I'm with you, you're not alone."

The angels told the shepherds to *look*. To notice. To see what God was doing right in front of them. And they're telling us the same thing today.

And you want to know one of the amazing things about noticing God at work? It leads us to joy! It leads us to amazement. It leads us to hope! It lead the mute Zechariah to burst into a song of joy and hope. Seeing God's presence carried Mary through her journey...hope carried her through her journey.

I want to change the way we think about hope.

Hope is not delicate. Hope is not fragile. Hope is not the pretty, pastel-colored feeling we're supposed to manufacture for Instagram posts.

Hope has dirt on her face and blood on her knuckles. Hope gets knocked down and rises for another go. Hope looks at the cross and says, "That's not the end of the story." Hope is stubborn and relentless, refusing to quit.

That's the God we meet in the Christmas story. A God who looks at human violence, suffering, and brokenness and says, "I'm not giving up on you." A God who is so stubborn in love that God takes on flesh and blood, enters our world in the most vulnerable way possible, experiences betrayal and suffering and death, and still doesn't abandon us.

The hope of Christmas is not that everything will be easy. It's not that suffering will disappear or that our fears are unfounded. The hope of Christmas is that God is *here*. Emmanuel. God with us. In the mess, in the muck, in the fear and uncertainty.

Into our despair and anxiety, the Word of God's hope is born.

Today, I invite you to do what the angels told the shepherds to do: *Notice*. Look around. Where do you see the Word at work? Where do you see God showing up, in the messy, unglamorous, everyday places?

Because God is here, God has always been here. And God will not give up on us.

See! Notice! Behold! God is here! God is with us!

Amen.