

December 24, 2020
Christmas Eve
United, Oak Park

Moving Beyond Our Fears

Near the middle of the very familiar words that we have heard from the Christmas story in the second chapter of Luke this evening is the statement that the shepherds were *terrified* upon seeing an angel of the Lord before them.

Of course like watchers of a television action-drama also know that the lead characters of the series aren't *really* going to die all of a sudden in the midst of an intense battle with some ferocious enemies, we know that the shepherds aren't really in for too challenging of a time ahead, because we have the advantage of having heard this story play out every Christmas Eve. The shepherds all go to Bethlehem and find the infant Jesus lying peacefully in a manger. And so it concludes happily ever after, as the saying goes.

In the end there wasn't a lasting reason for the shepherds in the nativity drama to have been terrified, but that they were terrified at one point might speak to a number of our emotions as 2020 comes to a

close. We might not be terrified by this familiar story, but we might well be frightened by any number of other things going on these days.

Dealing with a global pandemic certainly has many people terrified. Even while vaccinations for COVID-19 began this past week, we also learned about a new mutation of the virus that's been identified in the United Kingdom, and it appears to be even more easily transmitted than other strains that people have already been dealing with.

This past year we have been further terrified about the greater divisions that were already polarizing us as a country between red states and blue states, urban and rural areas, or evangelical Christians and people from other faith traditions.

We may be terrified by long-term economic outlooks that could delay young people entering the job market or older people needing to delay retirement. How many of us have been losing sleep over these concerns either for ourselves or for people who are close to us?

Some of these fears have even been heightened in us after a recent election cycle with intense polarization. Thinking about what 2021 will bring with it may produce greater anxieties in many people than do most transitions from an old year to a new one.

And still there is hope in the familiar story that begins with Mary and Joseph traveling from their home in Nazareth to Bethlehem—the ancient city of David. When the shepherds met up with Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, they found out that there was nothing there to be terrified about. The glory of God in a manger was peaceful and serene. The infant Jesus didn't come to hurt anyone. And in time this would become even more obvious. Jesus came to *heal* hurts and to bring hope to people who *already* faced terrors in their lives.

Born in a stable himself, Jesus identified mostly with people who didn't have homes or who were cut off from what they needed to live fulfilling lives. Years later, as he started his public ministry, he identified with some of the old hopes that had been articulated by the prophet Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim

release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free” (Luke 4:18).

Of course as followers of Jesus, that same mission has become ours too. While this might not mean that everyone celebrating Jesus’ birthday this evening is fully intent on bringing good news to the poor, many of us are, and we have spent considerable time and money doing so, not only during this special season at year’s end, but throughout the year.

Despite the challenges we all have faced, we have continued to support efforts to feed the hungry through our support of Beyond Hunger’s food pantry and the ELCA World Hunger program.

A number of us have admired how organizations such as Housing Forward quickly reconfigured their programs so that work with homeless people in our area could continue, even though dozens of people gathering in emergency shelters isn’t possible these days.

We still contributed to the Holiday Food and Gift Basket—a program that usually occupies much of United Lutheran Church’s

building each year in early December—so that recipients could have gift cards for the things that their families need.

Together with millions of people around this country and around the world, we have figured out how to support people in need, and to see that the church's mission of providing care and hope to those who suffer still goes on, despite a pandemic that has changed how nearly everything functions.

Can we bring all the fears and disturbances of our hearts as 2020 comes to a close and place them in prayer before the son of God who himself came to face the world's misery and to transform people who would then actually do something about it? As first-century shepherds quickly realized, Jesus didn't come to terrify anyone; he came to show people how they *didn't have to* live in fear forever, but they could resolve to practice love.

We do not need to be divided against one another, but there are plenty of ways we can demonstrate even through our physical distancing that we are all together in the challenges we face.

Certainly a big part of the unity we see is right within the story at the heart of our celebration this evening. Here is Jesus—himself an outcast, born in a stable, and without a home—but welcoming other outcasts too.

In Jesus we see that our mission is not to divide or to wall ourselves out from others, but to find ways to welcome everyone without distinction into life-giving community; which sees others not as strangers or enemies, but also as children of God, and as brothers and sisters who Jesus came to redeem.

In coming together to see a defenseless baby, shepherds were able to acknowledge that even in their own insecurities and fears, they also received great blessings and hopes for peace. And they lead us to see that while there are indeed fears out in our own nighttime fields, we don't have to be immobilized by them either, we can also follow Jesus who shows us a better way to live.