

Christmas Sermon — Listen to the Angels! — December 24, 2008

There is nothing like a good Christmas Pageant and the Gospel of Luke is a Christmas Pageant ready made! It lifts our imaginations and we soar right back to that place in Bethlehem — if only for a night.

In Barbara Robinson's wonderful little story called "The Best Christmas Pageant Ever", she tells the story of the Herdman children hearing the Christmas Story for the very first time. They were terrible kids — enough to try anyone's patience — they pinched, kicked, swore — they were noisy and had no respect for authority. When they encountered the Christmas Story for the first time, their response was not passive or lukewarm.

— they knew nothing. They came to church for the first time for the refreshments. So their teacher was trying to tell the story and they were interrupting all the way through.

Well they got to the part about the angels, and after about eight interruptions, the teacher read, ***"And lo, the Angel of the Lord came upon them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and..."***

Gladys Herdman shouts out, Shazam! Flinging her arms open wide smacking the kid next to her.

What? The teacher asked, having never read Amazing Comics. Gladys goes on ***"Out of the Black of night with horrible vengeance, the Mighty Marvo..."***

The teacher interrupts with, "What you are talking about? This is the Angel of the Lord who comes to the shepherds in the field.

"Out of no where, right? In the black of night, right?"

The Teacher grimaced, but had to admit ***"In a way"***.

So Gladys sat back, looking very satisfied as if this was at least one part of the Christmas Story that made sense to her.

Shazam!

Can we engage the story with the same freshness?

The angels play such a wonderful role all the way throughout Luke's gospel. The angel came to Zachariah to tell of the birth of John. The angel came to Mary to announce that if she were willing, she would be the mother of the "Son of God". The angel came to Joseph telling him to trust what was happening.

And now tonight, the angels have come to the shepherds, saying ***"Fear not, for I have come to bring you tidings of Great Joy. For unto you is born this night a savior, a babe born in a manger in Bethlehem"***. And if one angel wasn't enough, a whole host

surrounded them singing ***“Glory to God in the Highest and on earth peace, good will to all!”***

The essence of the Angels has been so aptly captured in our wonderful carols.

Our songs of the angels are the reminder of that incredible relationship between heaven and earth, God and humanity,” The radiant streams from heaven above” to the lowliest of servants, simple shepherds in a field. These are reminders of the intimacy of God — The awesome mystery of the Ultimate who dared to come down and be with us.

These angels are the messengers of God — bringing good news. In the darkness of the night, they bring hope! Angels throughout the Bible are those ministering servants of God and they are continually being sent to help and protect us. Luke uses these messengers to remind us that God is the God of hope — even when things seem bleak, God is the God of Hope. God, this night, is breaking into our world, calling to us to Fear Not!!! Just two words to start with.

Fear Not! Wow! How often we need to hear those words and it’s not a new message. The history of humanity is so much tied up in coping with fear. Just a few short chapters into the book of Genesis and we have God calling for Adam, saying “Where are you?” and Adam responds, “I heard your voice calling and I was afraid”. Now here in the Gospel we have the Angels over and over again, first saying, “Do not be afraid — Fear Not!!

The world of Zechariah and Elizabeth, of Mary and Joseph, and of the Shepherds was indeed a world of fear. We see the pictures of Mary, calm and sweet, but the birth of Christ was, in its human dimension, a profound story of trust in God in the face of terrible adversity; marginal people in an occupied country coping with a difficult and uncertain situation.

Fear was very real. We know that and also have found ourselves in that place.

Christ has come to dispel our fears.

I have another story for you tonight. This is the story of a colleague who regularly visited a local nursing home. One of the residents who was unable to speak, or walk, one day, frantically gestured for him to come near. On her bed was a napkin with a picture drawn on it and it was very crude, but finally he figured out that it was a flashlight — he asked, You want a flashlight? She nodded an emphatic yes. So the next time he came, he brought one — flashing all around the room as he entered.

A big smile absolute transformed this woman's appearance..
Wondering why she so desperately wanted a flashlight — led him down to the nurses' station. Her nurse told him the story — a few weeks before they had lost power and the resident had been become very frightened. She needed a small beam of light to shine in the darkness to ease her fears.

We all have our fears — they differ one from another, but somewhere in each of our hearts, we've come tonight to hear those words of the angel and to remember that Christ has come to be with us through those fears and lead us to the place where we can join in the angel choruses singing "Glory to God in the highest, On Earth, Peace, Good will to all.

And so in the midst of a world and lives that feel caught in a whirlwind of upheaval, as we face the reality of change which we can rarely control, in the fear of the unknown, what is the Good News of Christmas here in 2008? The Good News is the same as the angel message to Mary and to the Shepherds. "***Be Not Afraid! Fear Not! Great things are happening. For unto us, all of us, is born tonight hope, and love, and peace, and light***". Christmas means birth. Birth means possibility and promise and potential. The angels don't tell us not to be afraid because there is nothing to fear. This, indeed, has been a year of turmoil for most of us – the list is real: economic uncertainty, job loss, coping with life-threatening illnesses, a continuing war, the normal challenges of coping with death or loss, or change, or worrying about the kids.

In the midst of all that, "Shazam!" The angel tells us not to be afraid because there is Good News that can bring light to the darkness, hope to those who despair, life where there is death, and love that overpowers fear.

Blessedly for all of us, we have this glorious season of Christmas that comes again and again each and every year to remind us and to renew within us the realization of the wonderful gift to us from a loving God — a God who sent God's own son into the world to take those very fears upon himself and replace them with the joyous message of light and love and hope.

"Be not afraid." God is born among us again tonight. And may the light, promise, and hope of Christmas carry you forward into this crazy world that is full of the unknown. Keep singing, "Joy to the World! The Lord is come!"

Our Yuletide activity is the remembrance of things past — it is so natural for us to want to curl up into the comforter of Christmas traditions and hear the story once again. That is our task for tonight. But for tomorrow, and all the days ahead, we need to hear the call of the angel that yearns for us to join in the anticipation of the ultimate promise — the fulfillment of which is yet to come. We have seen the fulfillment of promises — of God with us — the coming of Jesus — Emmanuel — the Light in the darkness. Tonight we look back to Bethlehem for

reassurance. But tomorrow, We are called to look forward through the stable and with Christ to draw the world forward into the kin-dom of God.

Glory to God in the highest, On Earth peace Good will to all!