

Christmas Eve 2009
The Celebration of the Incarnation

Isaiah 9:2-7
Psalm 148
Titus 2:11-14
Luke 2:1-20

Good evening!

I'm delighted to welcome you this evening.

Some of you have been waiting anxiously for this evening – to hear the Christmas story; to experience the joy of the music; to enjoy the moments of mystery in the play between darkness and light, uncertainty and trust. Or perhaps it is simply because this service marks a transition point for you, the movement from preparation to celebration.

Some of you may be here uneasily. There are still tasks to be done, food to be prepared, and your wondering if you can get away without cleaning the bathrooms before company comes. That's okay. Relax. Let this time be a gift to yourself, sacred space in which to breathe, a time when you are not responsible for anything other than to listen and receive good news.

Some of you are here tonight because you *want* to believe, but aren't sure you can, or how. And that's okay. This is a time to listen, not only to the stories that are so familiar most of us can repeat most of it by heart, even if we can't quite believe. Listen to the questions the story asks you. Where are you in this story? Are you a stranded traveler? A working stiff with a vision no one will believe? An overwhelmed host? An indifferent governor? A messenger of good news? Who have you been in the Christmas story, whose part feels familiar? Who would you like to become?

Some of you would really rather be somewhere else right now. You're here to please a spouse, a grandparent, a friend...and that's okay. Thank you. You've given them a precious gift, the gift of yourself, and we promise not to beat you up or demand your allegiance. Don't be afraid.

Don't be afraid. That's the first message that humans receive when the Christ is born. Don't be afraid, because I have good news – *great* news that will give you a chance to live in joy, in peace, in harmony.

We live in a world of deep darkness, a world that wants us to be afraid. Think of the messages that come to you constantly through all the media – Be afraid of Terrorists. Be afraid of the drugs your doctor gave you. Be afraid of living in the wrong neighborhood. Be afraid of body odor. Be afraid of the government. Be afraid of the water. Be afraid of the things that go bump in the night. You're not good enough. You don't have enough. You don't know enough. Be afraid. Be very afraid.

And when we are afraid we curl up on ourselves to protect ourselves. We build walls and barriers. We limit the number of people and the kinds of people with whom we are willing to associate.

But the message of Christmas is “Don’t be afraid.” It didn’t come a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away. It came in a very specific place – Bethlehem in Judea; in a very specific time – when Augustus was Emperor of Rome and Quirinius was governor of Syria. God chose to dwell fully in this one very human being, and that reminds us that God is capable of dwelling with God’s people and is willing and eager to do so. Those of us of a certain age remember the song from *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, where Judas asks, “Why’d you choose such a backward place in such a strange land?” And we know that because God is willing to be there with them, God is willing to be here, with us.

Do not be afraid. For you *are* enough. To whom do the angels sing? Shepherds! Migrant workers, ditch diggers, the guys who did the dirty jobs for lousy pay. They sang good news, great joy for *all* people. Peace, good will for those God favors – people like...shepherds!

And this good news doesn’t just get poured on you like a coat of paint. If you let it, it will start to work on you, changing you, shaping you, opening you up to deep, full, rich satisfying life. And when we live that kind of life, when we live at peace with ourselves and with good will for others, the world becomes a different place.

There’s a reason we sing the Hallelujah chorus at Christmas, proclaiming that the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our God. Because Christmas, that first Christmas and this Christmas make it possible for us to live in that new kingdom.

Meister Eckhart, the ancient Christian teacher wrote: “We are all meant to be mothers of God. What good is it to me if this eternal birth of the divine Son takes place unceasingly, but does not take place within myself? And what good is it to me if Mary is full of grace if I am not, also full of grace? What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to God’s son if I do not also give birth to him in my time and in my culture? This, then, is the fullness of time: when the Son of God is begotten within us.”

May Christmas open you to a life beyond fear, a life of hope and joy. Amen.