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Do Not Be Afraid: Christmas Eve Service

You know how there are some people who just LOVE all things Christmas, and there are those who could take or leave it... actually, might prefer to "leave it." I'm definitely a LOVE IT person. I love the stories, the Christmas movies, the decorations, the cookies and candles, carols and family gatherings! I would be happy if it was Christmas season all year long! I do have to say that I would probably get a bit tired of watching Charlie Brown's Christmas Special... as my daughters want to watch it over and over and over again! They know it by heart, and so do I! That's actually how they learned the Christmas carol "Hark! the Herald Angel's Sing." ☺

This beloved family favorite captures the tension between the commercial and the religious aspects of Christmas. And don't we all just love it when Charlie Brown gets so frustrated with the commercialism that he throws his head back and bellows, "Isn't there anyone who knows the true meaning of Christmas?!?!?" To which Linus calmly says, "Sure Charlie Brown, I can tell you what Christmas is all about!" and he proceeds to recite the scripture we heard Elaine read tonight, of shepherds who received good news from an angel about the birth of the Christ Child.

We've spent the past four weeks looking deeply at the angels of our Christmas story to uncover the meaning of their message. We've discovered that one of the first things these angels say is "do not be afraid." Did you know that, "do not be afraid" is the most often repeated directive in the Bible. And if you're looking at the Old and New Testaments, you will find 365 scriptures that instruct us to not fear or be afraid in reaction to the world, people, or events around us. That's enough for one reflection for every day of the year! Why is it that this phrase comes up so much, especially in the Christmas story?

Though Luke's narrative sounds grand and beautiful, given the power of hearing it each year on Christmas Eve, not to mention recited by our beloved Linus, it is a narrative that is trying to tell us that Jesus was born in a time of fear. The Roman Emperor was forcing the whole known world to do his bidding. Just a few verses earlier we were reminded that the bloody King Herod was the ruler of Judea. The holy family is making a journey no doctor

would advise in Mary's VERY pregnant condition. Even the shepherds—apparently not required to be a part of the census because no one cares about migrant workers like them—even they are told by the angels not to be afraid.

I'm indebted to blogger Jason Soroski for a rather brilliant insight about that scene, where Linus walks onto the stage, and quotes those verses in the spotlight. Soroski talks about memorizing that same section of Luke's gospel for a pageant of his own at school one year. "But," he says, "while working so diligently to learn those lines, there is one important thing I didn't notice then, and didn't notice until now. Right in the middle of speaking, Linus drops the blanket." He continues:

"Charlie Brown is best known for his uniquely striped shirt, and Linus is most associated with his ever-present security blanket. Throughout the story of Peanuts, Lucy, Snoopy, Sally and others all work to no avail to separate Linus from his blanket. And even though his security blanket remains a major source of ridicule for the otherwise mature and thoughtful Linus, he simply refuses to give it up. Until this moment. When he simply drops it. ... Most telling is the specific moment he drops it: when he utters the words, "fear not."

You're not alone if you want to go back and watch it again now. I sure did. And he's absolutely right. Linus walks onto that stage with his blanket held tightly, speaking his lines with great seriousness, but right in that instant when he gets to the angelic "fear not," the blanket suddenly slips to the floor, and Linus' face lights up. Soroski says:

"Looking at it now, it is pretty clear what Charles Schultz was saying through this, and it's so simple it's brilliant. The birth of Jesus separates us from our fears... The birth of Jesus allows us to ... drop the false security we have been grasping so tightly, and learn to trust and cling to [God] instead." In that moment on the stage, nothing changed for Linus... and yet everything changed! His fear didn't really go away, in fact, he picks it right back up after his recitation, but even if only for a moment, he was able to set it aside and embrace the moment.

The world today can be a scary place, and most of us find ourselves grasping onto a security blanket of our own, whatever that thing may be. It's difficult for us to imagine living without fear of SOMETHING... Glance at the news on any given day and you can come away as terrified as those shepherds were. Individual, personal troubles causes our fear to rise as well. Anything from medical difficulties to financial challenges to family conflicts can leave us shaking in our shoes.

It's easy to worry, to fear and fret, to channel our inner Charlie Brown – remember his pantaphobia? The fear of everything? But hard as the media may try, as hard as the politicians may try to keep you in fearful Charlie Brown mode, I challenge you to look instead to Linus this Christmas. To hear again his angelic "Fear Not!" No more pantaphobia, people of God. Enough.

Fear not, for here is good news of great joy for all people. Unto us all is born a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. Fear not, for God has come to be with us, Emmanuel.

God has met us in the places of our fears, walked side by side with us through the mess of life, and invites us to not only take comfort from this, but invites us to follow in Jesus's footsteps, choosing to enter into places of fear, places of vulnerability, places of danger in today's world, bringing with you a message of peace, hope, love and joy to a hurting world.

Luke's angels have been saying it to us all season long.

So Linus must be right. Fear not! God is here.

And that's what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown.