

## **Do Not Be Afraid!** **Christmas Eve, 2021**

Merry Christmas, Church! I know these masks are a pain, but this time last year you were outside worshipping! Isn't it good to be together? Amen. We welcome all of you on this blessed night. And those of you who are joining us online, we pray that you have been participating in this service and not just viewing it. And in that vein of thought, get your candles ready. At the end of our time together, with those who have gathered here, we are going to light our candles together but you will have to provide your own fire. I have not learned how to light candles over the internet yet!

What are you afraid of? I'm not talking about the deep, scary things. I'm talking about the things of everyday life, like snakes and spiders. It's amazing what some people are afraid of. I had a friend that was so afraid of snakes, when I wore my Python boots she had trouble being around me. Quite literally, when she was riding with me one time and we ran over a snake (which is very common in the south), when we ran over the snake she had her feet up on the dashboard, as if that would help. We have a good friend that to this day, before she gets there, I have to go on spider patrol. I go and see if I can find any spiders and I have stuff to spray in all the dark places. And while she is there, I am on spider duty any time of the day or night. What are you afraid of? I have some things that I'm afraid of that you might not suspect. I am afraid of speaking in public, crowds, hospitals and funerals. So, quite naturally, God decided to help me with my fear and make me a minister. But one of the things that would surprise you that I'm afraid of is babies. Yes, babies. I'm not talking about three or four-month-old babies. I'm talking about the little bitty, squirmy things. You know, the little ones, the newborns. Give me a room full of doctors, lawyers, educators and engineers and I'm in heaven. One little baby just scares the bejeebers out of me.

Throughout the birth narrative, whether you read it through Matthew's eyes or Luke's eyes, there is a reoccurring theme. That theme is: Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid of what? Do not be afraid of God and do not be afraid of what God is doing. Nevertheless, the fear of God is a common theme. It always has been. In ancient times, among the Jewish people, God was seen as the Holy Other that was unapproachable. God was so sacred and so feared that when they ran across God's proper name, Yahweh, in their scriptures, they would not breathe it out loud but rather substituted one of the minor names: Adonai, Elohim, El Shaddai. They would not even repeat the proper name of God. On God's holy mountain, if an animal or a person touched that mountain at the wrong time, that animal or that person was to be put to death. Fear of God is a common theme. In the Jewish temple there's a place called the Holy of Holies where God was said to dwell. It was so feared that only one person went into the Holy of Holies and that was only one time a year. And this is what they did. They tied a bell around his neck. They tied a rope around his waist so that, when he went in, if something happened to him nobody else's life would be risked. They would just drag him out of there.

Jesus came presenting a very different picture of God. Jesus presented God as the loving Father. He said, "When you address God, address God as 'Abba.'" Abba is an Aramaic word. The closest word we have in English is daddy. Jesus presented God as the sacrificial Father. In my profession, we are guilty of sometimes presenting the story as if the loving and kind and benevolent Jesus somehow had to pacify an angry,

vengeful God. But nothing could be further from the truth. "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." Jesus said that we should approach God as beloved children, confident that we can go into God's presence without fear and without trembling. Years ago, I came across a story about one of the Roman emperors. He was coming back from a successful campaign and was parading through the streets of Rome. A little boy broke loose of his handlers and was approaching the emperor, when a big, burly Roman soldier stopped him in his tracks and said, "Son, don't you know who that is? You can't approach the emperor like that." The boy said, "He may be emperor to you, but he's my daddy." What do you want to bet that he got to see the emperor? It's kind of like this, and it's gonna sound like I'm going off in left field, but I'm not. Just bear with me. Almost once a month, at least once every other month, I have somebody who says, "Pastor, I've got something to confess. I try to do my prayers at night but I find myself going to sleep on God. I feel so bad." I say, "Don't you dare feel bad about sleeping on God." Here's why. A lot of you have kids and those of you who don't have kids have also experienced this. You've had a small child, who was out playing around, crawl up in your lap for whatever reason and they're messing around and asking questions and yada, yada, doing whatever kids do. And, all of a sudden, they're asleep. Are you ticked off? Or are you blessed and happy that that child feels so loved and so comfortable that they can crawl up in your lap and go to sleep? That's how God feels when one of His kids goes to sleep on Him.

In the birth narrative, angels are continually telling people that are a part of that narrative, "Do not be afraid!" When Joseph found out that Mary was pregnant and he knew the child was not his, he had the right to have her executed. But, being a godly and righteous man, he had in his mind to put her away quietly. And an angel appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife because what is conceived in her is of God. This child will save his people from their sins." When the angel appeared to Mary to inform her of God's plan, he began by saying, "Mary, do not be afraid! You who are blessed of God, you are going to conceive and bear a son. You are going to give him the name Jesus because he's going to save his people from their sins." In the story that Sharyn read just a few moments ago, the first people that received the news of the Christ Child's birth were shepherds out in the field. The first thing out of the angel's mouth is, "Do not be afraid!" But there's something very beautiful here and let me let me stop here for just a moment and tell you the object lesson that is going on behind the scenes. In that era, shepherds were seen as outcast. They were on the margins of society. You see, their flocks made too many demands on them for them to observe the ritual law, the ritual laws of washing their hands and observing the Sabbath. They couldn't just leave the sheep for 24 hours at the mercy of thieves and wolves. And so, by the proper people and the religious people, they were viewed as outcast. But the angel appeared to them first. And he said, "Do not be afraid! For behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people." All people, not some people, not for the religious elite, not for the upper crust, but for all people. And tonight, that is the message I want you to hear, no matter who you are. I want you to hear God saying to you personally, "Do not be afraid of Me. Do not be afraid of Me. I love you." Hear God say, "This is for you. I hear normal people are not afraid of babies!" I want you to hear God saying, "This is for you. This is Me, giving Myself to you in the most nonthreatening way possible. I'm coming to you as a baby to say to you: no longer should you fear Me. No longer be afraid. I love you. I love you just as you are and this is My gift to you."

Tonight, I want you to leave with a smile on your face, with a song in your heart, because God has gone to great lengths to give you the gift of salvation through a baby. God has gone to great lengths to keep you from being afraid of Him. Our gift has come to us in the most unthreatening way possible. Accept your gift. Go home with a smile on your face, a song in your heart, hearing God say to you (yes, you, whoever you are), "This is how much I love you. This is what I'm willing to do for you. This is what I offer you." This baby, your gift from God, brought light and hope to a dark and dreary world. We have the privilege to have and share that light. And so, here in a little while, I hope you leave with a song in your heart, a smile on your face, having experienced the true light and hope that God brought in Christmas. We share this light with our dark world.