



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“HEARING IT AGAIN FOR THE FIRST TIME”

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 9:2-7; Luke 3:1-6

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Christmas Eve,
December 24, 2020 at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

“Prepare the way of the Lord,

make his paths straight.

Every valley shall be filled,

and every mountain and hill shall be made low,

and the crooked shall be made straight,

and the rough ways made smooth;

and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” ’

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Let us pray...

Almighty and Everlasting God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing, acceptable, and even joyful in your sight, for you are our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

I was joking with Martha Ann the other day. I told her that I had selected a marvelous little passage from Leviticus to serve as this evening’s primary Scripture lesson. She didn’t say anything right away, which usually is an indication to me that she is trying to find a nice, calm, loving way to correct me. After a few moments, she casually and yet gracefully replied: “Leviticus, huh?” Now if you look up “Leviticus, huh?” in the dictionary, an apt translation is, “Surely, you can’t be serious.” And, of course, I wasn’t serious.

I liken us tonight, friends, to the liturgist who was asked on a similar Christmas Eve, to read from Luke chapter 2, and he began his remarks by saying this: “Now, stop me if you have heard this before.” I say that because we know this story! We know this night very, very well. And we know that we’re not going to have a word from Leviticus. We know that it is very unlikely that we’re going to find any reference in the bulletin to that classic hymn, “There is a Balm in Gilead,” as good as it is. No! We’re going to hear and sing such classic Christmas carols as “O Come All Ye Faithful” and “Joy to the World”; indeed, from First (Scots) in Charleston to St. Giles Cathedral in

Edinburgh, on this day people the world over are very likely going to hear some variation of the story of the birth of Jesus.

I invite you to listen to it again as it comes to us from Luke chapter 2. “In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.’ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,
‘Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!’

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.’ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.”

Ah, to be certain, that is a story that we all know – we have heard it before, and we come this evening, and we want to hear it again; but, more than that, we expect to hear it again! But let us consider for just a moment how different our response is from those who first heard that glorious news on that first Christmas Eve. Take, for example, the shepherds. We read that the Bible tells us, “Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.” The King James Version puts it, “They were sore afraid.” And they weren’t the only ones who were afraid.

Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were the parents of John the Baptist. It happened that Zechariah was approached by an angel of the Lord while he was performing his priestly duties in the Temple some time before, and there he was told the miraculous news that he would have a son, and that his son would play a significant role in preparing the way of the Lord. Upon hearing that news, the Bible tells us that “[Zechariah] was terrified; and a sense of fear overwhelmed him.”

Of course, there is Mary, as well. When she was first approached by the angel and told that the Holy Spirit would come upon her and that she would give birth to a son, the Bible tells us that “she was much perplexed by the angel’s words and wondered what sort of greeting this might be.”

Now, in each of those interactions – be it with the shepherds or Zechariah or Mary – the respective angels...they proclaimed essentially the same message – “Do not be afraid.” But I dare say, that sort of message doesn’t resonate with us that way these days, does it? I mean, it is not like any of us are going to go home and lay our head on the pillow and say, “God, help me to not be frightened by Christmas.” None of us are going to have to go home tonight another way for fear of some earthly ruler who is going to take our life...there are no King Herods looming over us.

Ah, our fears are located in other things! There are some people who are worshipping with us remotely this evening...and some of that has to do with fears related to COVID-19. And even for those who are here, perhaps there is a family member or a friend who has been affected. Maybe your own pew is not quite as full as it ordinarily would be because of the fact that someone may not be able to travel as freely right now.

Here, in this sacred space, it feels different! We may have resumed in-person worship back in May – we may have been at this for quite a while – but it still feels strange to not shake someone’s hand...it’s awkward to wear a mask. And who would have ever thought we would be called upon to register online in order to attend a service of worship; that we, as a church family, would feel compelled to cap our anticipated attendance, and worship with fewer people than normal in order to maintain safe social distance in order to keep one another safe!

What I am trying to say is that we may not have the kinds of fears which burdened the shepherds of so long ago, that the glory of the Lord may not be shining around us in that kind of acute powerful way, but we have fears and anxieties nonetheless, and whether they have to do with the Coronavirus, or economic uncertainty, or our child’s education, or honoring the image of God in our neighbors...these and countless others are the issues that weigh heavily on our minds; they make it so that ours is not such a silent night after all.

But here’s the thing...God knows all of our troubles. God knows all of our worries! In fact, God knows everything there is to know about us, and God knew everything there was to know about the holy family on that first Christmas Eve! And, lest we forget, things were not exactly Christmas card perfect for Mary and Joseph! Mary had just made a long and difficult journey just days before the birth of her child, and now she’s spending her first night as a mother out in the cold and in the company of animals. And, Joseph, not only is he having to tend to the immediate needs of his beloved, but soon he will have to pack up the family and flee to Egypt. But, for now, we know that they were in a stable...and let us not think for a moment that the setting of a stable was the place Mary would have chosen to bring her son into the world; indeed, the setting of a global pandemic may not be the setting of our choosing either -- nevertheless, the Christ-child comes...the story is told again...and we listen; and, perhaps, if we are so blessed, we might hear it again as if for the first time!

And what would it mean for us to hear it again for the first time? Well, to begin, it would be a matter of grace, but it is also a matter of understanding not only our own context, but the nature of the Christ-child who is the same within any context. It shouldn't be lost on us that we are celebrating Jesus' birth in the midst of winter's long nights. More to the point, this is typically the darkest time of the year - perhaps both literally and figuratively - and yet, it is precisely at this moment in time that we celebrate the coming of the one whom John declared to be the Light of the World - that light that shines in the darkness and which the darkness did not overcome!

And the reason that is so important for us to comprehend is because that is essentially the message of Christmas - for sprinkled throughout those angelic encounters with Zechariah and Elizabeth, and Mary and Joseph, and the shepherds, and the wise men...four simple words echo a resounding biblical refrain: "Do not be afraid." "Do not be afraid!" Perhaps that message resonates more deeply with us than we realized which is why, in so many ways, we all need a little Christmas right this very minute!

We need it, because, all too often, we allow the worry to get the best of us...we look at what is going on in the world, and even in our own lives, and we can become afraid of what the future might hold. Yet tonight, on this night of nights, we behold again the miracle of Christmas, for as Jesus came into the chaos of the world in a profound way nearly two thousand years ago - oh, no less divinely favored are those troubled hearts into which our Savior presently comes. Pastor Phillip Brooks affirmed this when he penned those words: "O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray, cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today! We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell. O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel."

The gift of God's Son at Christmastime is the very gift of God's love, and it came to a world that was in distress -- a world in need of healing and wholeness -- a world in need of God. Indeed, this is the God who continues to abide with us - no matter what our distress...no matter how dark the darkness seems to be...and the message is still the same, "Do not be afraid." But that's not all the angel said, is it? No! Listen again to what else the angel proclaimed: "Do not be afraid; for see - I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people."

Friends, the calling card of the faithful was never intended to be fear...but rather joy! And, here again, it is not that fear didn't somehow exist on that first Christmas Eve, fear was present alright, it's just that in the midst of that fear, joy came...and joy continues to come...and not just at Christmastime -- the Bible tells us that joy comes every morning!

At the end of the day, if the story of Jesus' birth is truly a story that we know by heart, then it will even more abundantly reside in our hearts! And when that happens, the light of Christ, it will shine in whatever darkness is uniquely ours...and it will continually push out that fear, first making of it but a shadow; though, one day, making of it...nothing, because that is the power of the light Christ! So let us continue to ponder this blessed Christmas story as if for the first time - and in doing so, may it be for us slightly less familiar and immensely more astonishing. Let us take this story, and, with joy, let us run with it...let us run so fast that others have a hard time keeping up. Let us go and tell it on the mountain...that Jesus Christ is born!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

*The following sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies.
When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.