



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

1611 E Main St., Watertown, WI 53094

(920)261-2570

A Stephen Ministry Congregation

www.goodshepherdwi.org

Advent 4, Wednesday

December 21, 2016

“Fear Not”

(Isaiah 35:3-4a)

Rev. David K. Groth

“Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who have an anxious heart, ‘Be strong; fear not!’” (Isaiah 35:3-4a).

Collect of the Day: Stir up Your power, O Lord, and come and help us by Your might, that the sins which weigh us down may be quickly lifted by Your grace and mercy; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

On Monday a truck plowed through a Christmas market in Berlin killing twelve and injuring 48 others. It was an act of terrorism. Isis claimed responsibility. Isis knows it cannot take over Germany's land or buildings or riches. What they want is fear. And to a certain degree, they've achieved that haven't they?

This morning, I read a little essay by Rick Steves, travel host of Rick Steves' Europe. He said, "I imagine many Americans will cancel their trips to Berlin, (a city of 3.5 million people) or the rest of Europe (a continent of more than 700 million people), because of an event that killed a dozen people. As a result, ironically, they'll be staying home in a country of 320 million people that loses 30 people every day to homicides. . . He continues, "It is important that we do not confuse fear with risk, that we do not overreact. . . Keep on tavelin'."

But we are a fearful people. There is inside of each of us a place for fear, and that can be a good thing. There are things in this world worth being afraid of. Appropriate fear keeps us from making foolish and dangerous mistakes. But fear can also be a great enemy of life, the great impediment not just to travel but to love and hope and "Do not be afraid," the angel says to the startled shepherds on the hillside outside of Bethlehem. The way Luke tells it, "the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were terrified" and the first words they heard were "Fear not." Something amazing is about to happen. Something is about to happen that is going to change everything. But don't be afraid.

If God came to you and in spectacular fashion said, "Take note: Something is about to happen that will change everything", I don't think you would necessarily receive that

as good news. Your mind would probably race toward all the negative possibilities: terrorists getting their hands on a nuclear bomb, or hacking into the electric grid and shutting it down. You might be inclined to call your grown children and say, “Don’t even think about getting on an airplane.” An old pastor taught me once, “When people don’t have all the information, they automatically assume the worst.”

Fear is what we’re all about. “Fear not” is what faith is all about.

When Moses is becoming anxious about the dangers of leading his people out of Egypt, God says, “Fear not. I will be with you.”

To a frightened nation, quaking before the might of a cruel and overwhelmingly powerful enemy, “Fear not. I will be with you.”

To any who face the ultimate threat to life . . . “Even though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me.”

To any who must work with a mean and hostile boss . . . “The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life, of whom shall I be afraid?”

To the shepherds startled in the middle of the night by a bright light and the overwhelming presence and power of an angel, “Fear not.”

And to frightened disciples at an open tomb, “Fear not. He is not here. He is risen.”

One time, John the Baptist was in prison and in trouble. He had openly criticized King Herod, and this was not in a land that guaranteed a person’s right to free speech. John is in trouble. John is going to die and he knows it. He had been Jesus’ advocate. He had prepared the way for Jesus and had recognized in Jesus the righteousness and holiness and presence of God. John was a fiery preacher. He called the religious leaders a “den of snakes,” and talked about laying the axe to the roots of the tree and burning the dry branches in a consuming fire. John was no Mr. Rogers. But now he’s in prison and he’s having some fears and

misgivings. In the first place, Jesus isn't acting the way John thought the Messiah would act. He isn't taking sinners to task like John thought he should. What kind of Messiah, after all, would befriend sinners, be seen with them, eat with them? What kind of Messiah would spend his time with unrighteous, unclean men and women instead of insisting that everyone obey the law of Moses? What kind of religion would emphasize mercy and love instead of obedience?

But John is also afraid. He's alone. It's dark and damp in a tiny cell where he's kept like an animal. He has humiliated the king, a king who everyone knows is among the pettiest and cruelest of tyrants. John is going to die and he knows it, but he'd rather not die in vain, for something untrue. So he asks Jesus to assure him that he is indeed the One that God's faithful people had been waiting for, for so long.

Jesus sends back an encoded message to John. Tell John, he says, that the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear." It's almost a direct quotation of a passage everyone knew from the prophet Isaiah. John's captors would not have known it or understood it. But Jesus is pointing John to Isaiah 35, where the prophet gives us signs of the messianic age. Jesus is saying, "Fear not John, I am the one. I am he for whom our people have been waiting. Look at the evidence. Look at what I've been doing. And remember John, as you sit there, in that cell, cold, hungry, thirsty, waiting for your inevitable execution – remember the promise made to our people long ago, "They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God . . . Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who have an anxious heart, 'Be strong; fear not!'"

Seems that would be a good message to us today, amidst our fears. "You shall see the glory of the Lord, so strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Be strong; fear not!"

But we live in a land where fear and fear mongering has become an industry. Last week in the WSJ there was an

article about a developer starting work on hundreds of luxury underground condominiums, built to withstand the apocalypse, the developer says. Prices start at about a million. He's calling them bunkers, and the walls will be 12 inches thick. Everything will be able to function off the grid. There will be underground communal gardens. There's a waiting list of 900 names on it, and it's growing by about 50 names a day.

That's how fear sells to people with a lot of money to burn. For the rest of us, fear sells certain cars. Fear sells guns. Fear causes population shifts as refugees move across international borders and city dwellers head to the suburbs. And fear limits and paralyzes. Fear of failing prevents us from trying something new. Fear of rejection keeps us from going out for the team, trying out for the part, applying for the job, or even drawing a picture. Sometimes fear prevents us from saying, "I love you" or, "Will you marry me?" There is something paralyzing about fear, something that reduces the scope of our lives, the extent of our love, the generosity of our giving.

Everyone is afraid of something. Who isn't afraid that something terrible will happen, the car will crash, the test will come back positive, and you'll be a widow or a widower? And some of you might wonder, if I have faith, why am I so fearful? Or conversely, since I'm so fearful it must mean I don't have faith.

Faith does not mean that fear disappears. As people of faith, it means we keep doing what we need to do, what God has called us to do, in spite of our fears. It means we keep on living, and loving and caring in spite of our anxieties. Courage, someone said, is fear that has said its prayers. So we keep going, because we know and believe we are ultimately and forever safe in the Lord's arms.

"Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who have an anxious heart, 'Be strong; fear not!'" Why? Because something more real has already happened, something more powerful, more to be trusted than whatever it is you are most afraid of. God has

come. Jesus was born in Bethlehem. He has purchased and won you from all sin, from death and from the power of the devil. When that message finally gets through, or is finally remembered, it frees us from our fears, and feels as if God just gave us our lives back.

Fear is what we are all about. “Fear not” is what the Christian faith is all about. Matthew 6, Jesus said, “I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. . . . Which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And in John 14, Jesus said, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. . . Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid” (v. 27).

I want you to think about a time when, as children, you were really frightened. Maybe you were lying in bed in the middle of the night and maybe lightening struck the tree in the back yard it was so loud. Your house just shook or rattled. And maybe you crawled into bed with mom and dad and they held you close and, “Don’t be afraid. Remember God loves you. Everything is alright.” That is what faith is about. And it is the primary, fundamental and persistent message in the Bible.

Sadly, for many people the deepest fear of all is the fear of God. It grows out of a sense of personal sin, a sense that if we should meet God it will not go well for us. It grows out of a sense that God is surely angry at us, and that he’s a vengeful judge, whose wrath is great and whose punishment is surely coming.

But let’s think back to the dark streets of the little town of Bethlehem. God comes, not as a petulant judge, not as an angry autocrat, not as a cruel bully, not as a punishing tyrant. God comes as a child, an infant actually. As I’ve said many times before and will keep saying until it sticks: Any God who comes to us as an infant means us no harm, only life. In this infant is God’s love, God’s mercy, God’s forgiveness, God’s grace, God’s humility and vulnerability and approachability. We need not fear him. In fact, he loves us, and is our Savior. And because he loves us and is our

Savior, we need not fear anything. So . . . “strengthen the weak hands, make firm the feeble knees. Be strong. Do not fear.”
Amen.

