

The Reverend Matthew Hanisian
St. Martin's-in-the-Field Episcopal Church
Christmas Eve
December 24, 2016

"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..."

Earlier this week I was in a hallmark store looking for last minute Christmas stocking stuffers and I came upon a sight that will be seared into my memory for a long time. I was confronted with creatures so ghastly out of proportion and so distorted as to barely be recognizable as human. Above this shocking scene was a sign that said, "Precious Moments Nativity Sets Now on Sale."

Now what really got me were the angels. One robed in pink, one robed in light blue...blonde haired, googley large blue eyes, with simpering smiles that would have made Rubens gag, but would have given Salvador Dali pause for at least a quick twist of the mustache.

These are certainly not the angels of the Christmas story we have from Luke. If you have spent any time reading holy scripture where angels are concerned, they are wholly terrifying creatures. They are so awesome—in the original sense of the word: extremely daunting, causing fear, breath-taking, stunning—they are so awesome that every single time they are mentioned in Holy Scripture their first words are: Do not be afraid...Fear Not.

Do not be afraid... I don't know about you, but for me, this past year has been a year where fear seems to be closer to home and more prevalent than ever before. Fear both domestically and abroad in the wider world...fear for our children in their schools, for the disruption or even loss of our lives; fear of "the other," no matter who that is for us.

I've done some research and here's some of what I've found: The Pew Forum reported that the Christian share of the population has fallen to 70%--the lowest number in our nation's history.

The same study showed that the only religious portion of our population that has shown any growth at all are those who have no religious affiliation ...up to 6.8%, the highest level recorded.

Want some really scary news?, this again from the Pew Forum: for the first time in more than 130 years, adults ages 18 to 34 were slightly more likely to be living in their parents' home than they were to be living with a spouse or partner in their own household.

- Last week Russia's ambassador to Turkey was murdered during a public speech at an art gallery.
- Nearly 1 in 100 worldwide are now displaced from their homes— more than 60 million —the highest since World War II.
- 1,630 people died from cancer in the US every single day this past year.
- 27 people are murdered every day in the US by a gun.
- In neighboring Prince George's County, homicides are up 71% from last year in.

On the drive to church every day, I pass the Anne Arundel County police headquarters on Veterans highway. Over 880 Heroin overdoses have happened this year...resulting in over 112 deaths from heroine.

Do not be afraid? Fear not? How can we NOT be afraid? How can we NOT be fearful?

Into our secularized holiday season—where Christmas is more like Thanksgiving with presents than the celebration of the incredible birth of God into our world— here's why as Christians, we who follow Christ, who are disciples of the same Jesus whose birth we celebrate tonight—here's why we should not be afraid: We. Know. The. Truth.

That good news, that the terrifying angel brings to the shepherds working third shift out in the fields?...we know the truth of what that is all about. That angelically delivered good news is the same amazing good news that we already know, but are given afresh—reminded of once again, tonight.

That good news and that truth are centered on two sure and certain pillars of our faith: Love and hope.

Here is something more shocking than any of the statistics quoted earlier: God loves the world—loves you loves me SO MUCH that God would do the absolutely unthinkable. God is born into God's own creation to live with us. What rational motivation does God have to do this? None. There is no rational reason why God should do this. But love isn't rational. Ask anyone who has ever fallen in love if love is rational? Love, as it turns out, is not conscribed within the boundaries of rationality. And, love is as unpredictable as...well, God is....so perhaps it is no wonder that God who is the source of ALL love should do something so crazy as to take our frail form and live with us...know what being like you and me is all about.

The other pillar that our faith stands upon is hope. Hope is harder to put our finger upon I believe than love. We can look to any number of places and see love—our spouses, children, family members, even the people with us here in this church tonight. But Hope is harder to point towards, at least with any certainty.

And yet, hope is what I believe will truly transform and make possible the angel's do not be afraid, to the shepherds...and to us tonight. In the story of Jesus' birth that hope rests in one person, although a number of supporting characters get a dose of it.

The hope of this story rests in the person of Mary. God chooses Mary to be the bearer of the savior of our world, God's own creation. God chooses such an unlikely person—a relative nobody really—to nurture and give birth to God's own self. Mary enters into a great long line of relatively insignificant and improbable characters whom God chooses to imbue with hope—like the 90+-year-old-Sarai and her even older husband Abram to whom God gives more children than there are grains of sand on the beach; God gives hope to the abandoned Hebrew baby who is floated down the Nile who leads God's people out of their captivity in Egypt to the promised land...and many others of seemingly ordinary people throughout Holy Scripture God gives hope. God takes each of these ordinary folks and makes them extraordinary.

Fear not.

In our world we can point to a great many things that are not great joy, much less good news. But when we hear this story of the birth of Jesus we are reminded of the hope that God will work in us to change our world. That we can become that hope so that others might also have hope...that we who have been loved can in turn show that love to someone who feels unlovable. The hope and love we have been given afresh tonight and that we are to give to the broken world are what will change our lives, what will literally change our world.

At St. Martin's we have found dozens and dozens of ways to interact with our neighbors, with our region, with our world spreading that good news of great joy to those who need to receive that love and hope the most. For all those who darken the doors of this place on Christmas Eve and Easter...to all those who come to church here but only on Sunday mornings...to all those who don't have time or are too busy, who just can't make it as much as you'd like: you are invited to become a part of the good work that is being done here, to work with us, to laugh with us, to learn with us to grow with us to change our world. In doing so you will invite God to be Emmanuel—God with us who are ordinary and with whom God will do the extraordinary.

The world is a scary place of that there is no doubt, but into this world is born for us a savior who is Christ the Lord. Into our lives, if we let Him, God will enter bringing

hope and love, more than we have ever known. "And the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see-- I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.

AMEN.