

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

December 6, 2015

Second Sunday of Advent

Luke 1: 5-25

Angels of Advent: Gabriel Appears to Zechariah

Today we begin a series about the Angels of Advent and Christmas.

Today - Gabriel appears to Zechariah to announce the birth of John, Jesus' cousin.

Next week - Gabriel will visit Mary to announce Jesus' birth

The Sunday before Christmas - an unnamed angel visits Joseph

Christmas Eve - the angels visit the shepherds the night that Jesus is born

Jan. 3 - an angel visits Joseph again to help the Holy Family escape Herod's murderous rampage.

First about angels... The angels of the Bible are NOT the same as the angels of popular culture and Baroque and Renaissance art.

While there are only two named angels in the Bible (Michael and Gabriel) - there are nearly 300 references to angels throughout all of Scripture.

In Genesis, God sent an angel to guard the Garden of Eden after He banished Adam and Eve from it. In Exodus, the Ark of the Covenant, with which the Israelites carry around the Torah has angels on it. In the book of Daniel - Daniel has a vision and the angel Gabriel helps him to interpret it. In Isaiah, angels praise God.

There are also angels throughout the New Testament Gospels. They tend to Jesus when he is tempted in the desert. They minister to Jesus when he's in the garden of Gethsemane right before he's arrested. They are at the empty tomb on Easter assuring the disciples that Jesus has risen.

But it seems that most of all, angels are part of the Christmas story - and not just the Biblical story but the culture's expression and decorating of the seasons. They're on Christmas cards and posters at the mall. We put them on top of our Christmas trees.

But what about the biblical Christmas story? Angels are absolutely essential to it. And here's where the real definition of angels comes in to play. Angels are: messengers of God.

As messengers, each time they appear, they deliver important news. When God's going to do something big, He dispatches angels.

In our reading for today we have the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Zechariah was an old man - old and tired. He and his wife Elizabeth had spent their whole life trying to live a good life, but still God's ultimate blessing - a child - eluded them.

Now, Zechariah was a priest. Not an important Jerusalem priest, but an ordinary priest in a small town. Every year it was his duty to go to the temple in Jerusalem to offer incense at a certain time. Which wasn't as glamorous as it sounds.

His duties at the temple were actually pretty boring. While the high profile priests got the glamorous parts, he and hundreds like him did the mundane, day-to-day tasks. He had been doing this for years and I imagine that he was pretty much going through the motions at this point.

So there he is, tending to his ordinary priestly duties, when who should appear? It's Gabriel. And in an instant his life changed!

We might think "that's not so strange - an angel showing up at the temple." But Zechariah was fear struck. Perhaps he had become so bored with his routine that he could not even believe that heaven had broken through to him!

Gabriel had come and since angels are messengers from God, he has something to say - and it is good news! Zechariah and Elizabeth will have a son; long after childbearing years, their hearts desire will be granted. They will be parents, and John the Baptist will be their son.

But Zechariah is not so sure.

If only he remembered his Old Testament, he would understand and believe. He would remember that in Genesis angels come to Abraham telling him that he and Sarah will have a son in their old age. And that in Samuel, Hannah is also barren in her old age, and again, God gives her a son as well.

But, Zechariah is not thinking of these stories. When life is empty and full of disappointment, it's hard to get beyond the reality of daily life. And so he asks, "How can this be?"

And so to shock him out of his ordinary world, Gabriel plays a trick on him. If ever we wonder if God has a sense of humor, this story is one that proves that He does. Since Zechariah didn't believe what the angel spoke, he will not be able to speak until his child is born.

Meanwhile, his friends and colleagues are waiting for him to come out from the inner court of the temple, but this year it's taking a little longer than usual. And when he emerges, they can see that something has happened. And all Zechariah can do is mumble and flail with his arms in a frustrating game of charades.

And then I imagine his return home to Elizabeth - knowing she will be pregnant and not being able to speak to her for the entire 9 months!

And then finally, the day comes, and the baby is born. What will his name be? Isn't that the first thing we want to know? In those days in the Jewish tradition, a boy is named for the father. This boy will be named Zechariah of course.

And then Elizabeth says... JOHN! The officials object - there are no "John's" in Zechariah's family. And so they turn to Zechariah, who will no doubt correct his wife and set things right.

He gets a writing tablet and writes... JOHN!

And all of a sudden, he burst into the most eloquent song of praise - his first spoken words after his lifetime of waiting for a son and his 9 months of silence. (The hymn we'll sing at the end of the service is based on this song.)

The story of Zechariah is a total turn around. Gabriel brings hope to this hopeless man. That's what happens when an angel comes to you. They bring good news to those accustomed to bad news.

And Zechariah wasn't the only one accustomed to bad news. All of Israel had been waiting for what seemed to elude them – a savior which was promised for centuries. And they continued in their traditions and customs, perhaps losing their passion somewhere along the way, perhaps asking “is God paying attention to any of this or to us?”

The danger is that when we begin to believe that God has abandoned or at the least ignored us, we can begin to ignore Him, and before long our children don't know Him and His love for them, as we forget what it means to follow Christ.

We're not too unlike Israel. In many ways, God is pushed out, as we put our hope in anything other than Him and Christ – whether it be our careers, our portfolios, our achievements, our image. Placing our hope in these things will in fact leave us without hope when they in turn fail and disappoint us.

These are dark times – week after week, shootings – here and abroad - San Bernardino, Paris, Colorado Springs.

So what does our Advent angel Gabriel, say to us today? The same thing he said 2,000 years ago...

Don't be afraid!
Your prayer has been heard!

When it seems like all hope is lost, God does indeed come. He has NOT abandoned us – just as he hadn't abandoned Zechariah and Elizabeth, and Abraham and Sarah before them, nor all of Israel.

You know how when a child is afraid, sometimes it's not enough to reassure them, “Don't be afraid; you'll be okay.” Because if you ask the question, “Would you like me to stay with you a while?” the answer is always, “YES.” We need someone by our side when we're afraid!

When I was in my twenties and the boy I thought I'd be with forever broke up with me, I was afraid - and so I called my friend Linda who lives on the West Coast (2 hour time difference - I knew she'd be awake!). And then my friend Julie invited me to stay at her place for a couple days; and then my friend Rhonda stayed with me at my place after that. When we're in a scary place we need someone to come and be with us.

Darkness does turn to light. Sadness does turn to joy. Despair does become hope.

Just as light came to darkness in Israel, just as hope came to hopeless Zechariah, it will come to us as well. Perhaps like Zechariah we need to spend some time in silence – listening.

And listen to the song he sings once he speaks – a song of faith and hope!
In the tender mercy of our God, the dawn shall break upon us from on high,
to give light to those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death,
and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

This is the hope of Advent, spoken to us in these dark days.
Thanks be to God for this glorious Good News and the messenger who delivered it.

Amen.

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

December 13, 2015

Third Sunday of Advent

Luke 1: 26-38

Angels of Advent/Christmas: Gabriel appears to Mary

Today is the second in a 5-part sermon series on the angels of Advent and Christmas. We are looking at stories within the Christmas story which contain angel appearances. A little review from last week:

Angels appear all through out the Bible, both Old and New Testament; and especially it seems in the stories of the events around Jesus' birth.

We also learned that angels in the Bible are NOT the same as the angels of Hallmark cards, popular TV and Movies; there are no guardian angels in the Bible. Angels are, by definition, messengers of God.

When God is going to do something big – He dispatches angels to tell us. Angels, we also noted, always bring Good News.

Last week the angel Gabriel brought good news to Zechariah and Elizabeth, who were old and without any children, that they would have a son. And their son was to be John the Baptist who would prepare the world for the coming of Jesus.

Today we'll look at Gabriel's appearance to Mary; next week an unnamed angel appears to Joseph in a dream, Christmas Eve the angels appear to the shepherds the night Jesus was born; on Jan. 3 again an angel appears to Joseph again.

So today – Mary and Gabriel. The name Gabriel means "Strength of God," and he shows up in the Old Testament book of Daniel as well as in Luke. Muslims believe that Gabriel dictated the Koran to Mohammad. For Christians though he is most important because of this passage today.

This story is called the "Annunciation" because Gabriel "announces" something. His first words to Mary are, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you!" This is the basis of the Rosary Prayer: "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the Fruit of thy womb, Jesus."

The Annunciation is very important to Roman Catholics and is celebrated on March 25th actually. Why? It's 9 months before Jesus is born.

While last week, Zechariah was terrified when the angel appeared to him, this week Mary is perplexed, and wondered what sort of greeting this might be. After all, it's not every day that an angel comes with a message.

And Gabriel when he greets her says what angels commonly say when they appear to humans: Don't be afraid! It really makes me wonder what they look like and sound like that the first thing they need to say is, "Don't be afraid"!

I wonder if Gabriel said this because he knew what he was about to say to her and that she'd need to be assured BEFORE he delivered his message. Because, frankly, this is frightening news.

You're going to have a baby and you'll name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the son of the most high. God will give him the throne of his ancestor David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever and his kingdom will never end. (v. 31-32)

Mary's response seems a little subdued, "How will this be?" We read it with calm formality in church, but maybe she really screamed this at him. Part of me hopes she did! And then Gabriel obliges her and gives an explanation – "the Holy Spirit will come upon you and power of the most high will overshadow you. The child will be holy, the Son of God." (v. 35)

And then he gives more information about God's plan, which has already begun in fact. He tells her that her cousin Elizabeth is already pregnant (last week's story). If God can cause an old barren woman to conceive, he can also cause a young virgin to conceive. And then that great verse – one which can be lifted out of context and still speak truth, but which is even more powerful here – NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE WITH GOD. (v. 37)

And Mary's sublime response, "Here I am, servant of the Lord; Let it be with me according to your word." (v. 38)

God has a plan for the world, and God has a plan for us. And they are both related. And angels are messengers of this plan. The angel announces the plan, but still Mary had to say "Yes" to it. If she hadn't who knows how it all would have gone. Or maybe God chose Mary because he knew she'd say yes...

Thankfully, Mary does say yes; and not only yes, but she was eager to be part of God's plan.

The angel announces a plan for the salvation of humanity and Mary wants to be part of it. Wow! Can you imagine that happening to you? Especially if you're a teenage girl?

A couple of months later, Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth and not surprising for two women pregnant for the first time, they share joy beyond measure. They are caught up in joy and together rejoice at what God has done in their lives.

And what do people do in the Bible when they're overjoyed? Same as what some of us do.... They sing! Last week we heard Zechariah's song after this son was born. And this week we have Mary's song as she and Elizabeth share this tender moment together.

And like last week, the hymn after the sermon will be based on this song. It is traditionally called "The Magnificat," since the first thing she says, is "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior."

And so, our Advent Angel this week is Gabriel (again).
And his message? This week, it's a simple and straightforward.
The angel Gabriel says, to Mary and to us:

Don't be afraid

You are favored, loved, blessed by God

God will do great things in, with and for you.

And with God NOTHING is impossible.

God's not asking you to do the impossible thing - that's His department. He might be asking you to do a hard thing, and so He blesses and encourages you to give you what you need. Remember, it's not impossible, just difficult. God will take care of what's impossible.

And then Mary says to us:

When God comes to you, even with a frightening task, say YES!
And you will have joy.

This is indeed Good News- the kind of good news that can only come from our God.

Amen.

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

December 20, 2015

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Matthew 1: 18-25

An Unnamed Angel Speaks to Joseph in a Dream

This is the third week in our sermon series on the Angels of Advent and Christmas. And as we move through the Christmas Story we see that angels are messengers from God; that when something big happens – God sends His angels to tell us about it.

The first week we heard the angel Gabriel’s message to Zechariah and Elizabeth – that they would have a son in their old age and that he’d be John the Baptist who would prepare the way for Jesus. Last week we heard Gabriel’s message to Mary – that she would be the mother of the Son of God, and her response – Yes!

But then more needs to happen. Mary needs to be married into the line of David and that happens through Joseph. Mary is hugely important to all this, but so is Joseph. And Joseph isn’t so sure that he wants to be apart of this.

Remember, Mary has told him that she is pregnant, and that he is NOT the father. He had every right and reason to secretly call off the engagement (though betrothal in Bible times is more of a commitment than engagement in our time). Still the law would have allowed for him to leave her over this.

And so Joseph’s mind needs to be radically changed - Right now in fact - or else – no Christmas story, no Jesus. And so God’s messenger - an angel - speaks to Joseph in a dream – which is not an uncommon way for God to speak to us – not every dream – but some dreams are clearly significant and crystal clear.

And what’s the first thing an angel says when they appear? “Don’t be afraid.” But this “Don’t be afraid” is different from the last two weeks. Here Joseph is told not to fear what is about to happen, rather than the angel himself.

And Joseph’s fears must be many: Afraid of what’s happening in general, afraid of divorcing Mary, afraid of taking her as his wife, afraid of what their good and faithful Jewish families and society would say and do. This would be the end of his carpenter business.

The angel has to break through all these fears and barriers for God’s will to be done. But that’s not all. Because remember - Angels always bring GOOD NEWS!

And here it is:

*Behold: a virgin will conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel
(which means God with us).*

Not “A God” with us - Not a superhero with us - Not a mythic creature with us,
But the living God, the creator and ruler of the universe – that’s who is with us.

I don't know if when the angel told Joseph that this child would be born of the Holy Spirit and that he'd be "Emmanuel, God with us," if Joseph could actually grasp the immensity of it all. Could he understand the scope of what this little boy would grow up to be and to do? Bring about the reconciliation of all humanity back to God and with one another? Accomplish the healing of all creation?

That's pretty big news! No wonder God needed an angel to tell him! Just imagine if a human - one of his friends or family, or even a prophet or priest - had predicted it. Would he have obeyed God and taken Mary as his wife? I don't know. (But these are fun questions to ask aren't they?)

Remember, angels bring messages of news too good to be believed - messages of miracles that tear apart our understanding of how life works. When God acts this way with humans, angels are needed to shock us out of our daily lives.

And they give us a heavenly vision: God's vision of what's happening and going to happen. Behold a virgin will conceive and bear a son, and they will call his name Emmanuel. This is the good news - the astounding, overwhelming good news delivered to a worried Joseph.

God is coming - in the flesh!

And so the angel is saying pretty much the same thing this week as last week and the week before: Don't be afraid, I'll be with you and not just you but the whole world. Two powerful and life-changing (world changing!) messages.

Fear Not!

I am with you!

I wonder what our fears are. Perhaps they are specific - a date on the calendar, a conversation that needs to happen, a diagnosis yet to be given. Or maybe they are less defined - what's happening in the world, an uncertain future for your career or family.

Whatever it is, God's response is the same - I am with you! You are not alone!

May we, like faithful Joseph, be bold and brave enough to believe in this good news, this advent season and beyond.

Thanks be to God for this glorious gospel. Amen.

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

December 24, 2015

Christmas Eve

Luke 2:8-14

FEAR NOT!

For the past three weeks here, we've been listening to the angels of Christmas. First — actually before he appears to Mary — the angel Gabriel appears to Jesus' uncle Zechariah with the good news that he and his wife Elizabeth, though they are VERY old, will have the son they have longed for their whole lives.

Then Gabriel appears to Mary to announce to her that she will become pregnant by the Holy Spirit and give birth to the one who will save — who will provide a way out from the dark side — Jesus.

Then another angel speaks to Joseph in a dream, that he should not put Mary out, but that he should indeed marry her. And on January 3 we'll hear what another angel says to Joseph (again in a dream) after Jesus has been born....

But tonight — tonight — is different from all those angel visitations....

Listen again:

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, "Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, 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, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men." (Luke 2:8-14, KJV)

When you hear these familiar words, whose voice do you hear saying them?

I hear Linus, from the classic *Charlie Brown Christmas*.

After clamoring for the perfect tree and the perfect pageant, Charlie Brown — freaking out — asks, "Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?" To which Linus replies, "Sure Charlie Brown, I can tell you what Christmas is all about."

And Linus walks center stage in the empty auditorium where they've been practicing the Christmas pageant — clutching the blue blanket without which he wouldn't be "Linus" — the security blanket his friends are constantly teasing him for and trying to get him to leave behind.

It is an odd and sweet combination — the most mature and thoughtful of the Peanuts gang always has in his hand and by his side a security blanket.

"Sure Charlie Brown, I can tell you what Christmas is all about." ... "Light's please..."

And we go with Linus, Charlie Brown and all the rest, to the rocky ground of the shepherd's field outside Bethlehem, to a night perhaps as warm as tonight — probably not raining. And again — an angel.

We have learned that angels pretty much always **say** and **bring** the same thing every time they show up. They SAY: Fear Not! And they BRING: Good News — and the good news is the presence of God.

Fear Not the angel says. Fear Not Linus says. And Linus... ..drops his blanket.

Now, Charles Schultz was a devout Christian and he knew exactly what he was doing. He has Linus let go of his “transitional object,” his lovey, his comfort and security blanket, at the precise moment when he says, “Fear not.”

And now Linus stands wrapped solely in the good news of God coming in the flesh to really be with us.

Jesus — God in the flesh — is our security, our safety, our comfort. Because, “Fear not” by itself is an empty platitude. God does not ask us to drop our fears and suck it up, manufacturing courage and confidence all by ourselves. No, there is always the promise of his presence with us. And to prove it he, God himself, showed up.

Because the fears are real; and can be more than a minor annoyance. Some fears are crippling, terrifying even.

I wonder, what are you clutching, holding so tightly that you’ve come to believe that without it you would...I don’t know.. feel lost? What fears are held in check, covered and contained by that blue blanket of yours?

And what if, like Linus, you dropped the blanket?

Because really, it is only with empty hands (and hearts) that we have the ability to receive the gift God gives us. And not just tonight or tomorrow, but every moment of every day. Remember the gift is his presence WITH us, not just a sentimental story sung in candlelight once a year.

Because in 30 minutes or so, you will leave the warmth and beauty of this sanctuary (safe place), and return to the drizzle of daily life. You may remember that when Linus finishes explaining what Christmas is all about, he picks the blanket back up and walks off stage.

Because even when we stand securely in the firm confidence of the promises of God, the fears are bound to return, or are lurking just off stage or around the corner with the next disappointment or tragedy or diagnosis or loss...

And so we’ll return to what we know, to the quick comfort of whatever is at hand.

But you know, Linus will give up his blanket one more time before we leave the Peanuts Christmas. At the very end, when they have transformed Charlie Brown’s pathetic twig of a tree into a thing of beauty, it is the blue blanket wrapped around the base that holds it up straight.

And while the soundtrack to the transformation of the little tree is — appropriately — *O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree*, their joyful response is the song of the angels — *Hark the Herald Angel’s Sing*, they proclaim.

The focus is no longer the tree itself, but that to which it points heavenward: The immensity of God — and not just God “out there” but born here — on earth for us and for all people.

And this is where this angel appearance is different from the others. Because THIS is the only time when there is more than ONE angel. Because this event is like none other, and it requires an explosion of joy both in heaven and on earth.

You see, Christmas is an invitation to know God personally in the person of Jesus Christ. Christmas is an invitation by God which says: Look what I’ve done to come near to you. Now draw near to Me. I don’t want to be a concept; I want to be a friend. (Tim Keller)

So, don’t be afraid. God is here — and there — and there — He is WITH YOU.

So drop your blankets, leave them at the base of the tree — the tree which proves God's love for the world, which is not the decorated trees of Christmas, but rather the undecorated and empty tree of the cross upon which Jesus died, proving to us that God's love is more powerful than our fears.

Don't be afraid. God is with you.

You can drop your blankets.

AMEN.

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

January 3, 2016

Second Sunday after Christmas
Epiphany Sunday

Matthew 2:13-23

An Angel Appears to Joseph AGAIN

This is the last in our series on the Angels of Advent and Christmas. We met the angel Gabriel twice—first when he visited Zechariah, Jesus’ uncle; and then when he announced to Mary that she would be the mother of the Messiah. Then an unnamed angel spoke to Joseph in a dream that he should indeed marry her. Then Christmas Eve we heard for the first time from more than one angel, when all of heaven broke into song with the good news of Jesus’ birth.

The Christmas season will end on Wednesday with the Feast of Epiphany when the church celebrates the arrival of the Wise Men to Jesus, Mary and Joseph with their gifts.

And today we hear what happens after that: an unnamed angel appears to Joseph three times (again in a dream each time). My guess is we don’t typically think of this as part of the Christmas Story, but the “Flight to Egypt” is a turning point for Jesus and his family, flinging them from the safety and security of home and what they know, into harsh refugee life on the run from a corrupt and murderous king.

Angels, remember, are messengers from God, who say and bring the same thing each time they appear:

Say—Fear Not

Bring—Good News—which, until now, has been the promise of God being WITH them/us

Always this tension—between Fear and Hope.

Though it has seemed that Hope (and Joy, Peace...) have always won out...that the Good News overrides the fear: The child Mary was carrying was conceived by the Holy Spirit! The son she would bear would be the long-awaited Savior! And after the celebrated birth, wise men from the east came to worship and offer gifts to the Christ-child! Truly the Messiah had come! And Mary and Joseph were his earthly parents! It’s all about the future—blessing—glory—Hopes abound!

But today, things take a turn. Even the angel appearance is “off”—coming in a dream—no name....And the delivery is not like the others either. No “Fear not, for I bring you good tidings of great joy...”

This time it’s quick and to the point: RUN! RUN AWAY NOW! There is not even time for the prefacing word of comfort.

This time it is all fear: warning and instructions... King Herod knew the child was alive in Bethlehem and was determined to eliminate any threat to his throne. So Herod the butcher issued orders that any male child under two years old in the general vicinity of Bethlehem must die. By the cover of night the family made their escape engulfed in the fear of being caught.

As they fled to Egypt that night, Mary and Joseph must have been reeling from the sudden yankseized by this tension.

And if we're hones —so are we. So much of our lives also resides in this tension between hope and fear. And there is no escaping this reality, it all comes with having a pulse and struggling with our faith in God and his call on our lives.

Fear, as I'm defining it here, is being afraid and apprehensive about the future and the unknown. It's anxiety which is closely associated to unbelief or mistrust. We know that a certain degree of fear and caution is healthy, because it protects us from real dangers that can potentially harm us.

But when reasonable caution, a vulnerable moment or situation, becomes an unreasonable fear, and despair for the future, then the Evil one is at work causing doubt and mistrust in God himself and his promises.

Fear is a like a beast which can strike at anytime and may take any number of forms. Maybe you are afraid for your children or your grandchildren for what might happen to them. Or is yours a fear of being alone? Fear of disease and death? Fear of what others think of you? Fear of financial failure? What is it that makes you anxious, afraid?

In my work with young people through the decades, I've seen this sense of despair over and over. Teenager —particularly vulnerable as they begin separating from their families as they grow toward independence—can experience an acute sense of anxiety and hopelessness about the future. The desire to fit in...

The stress of expectations placed on them...can lead to
Drinking and drug abuse / eating disorders / depression...which can lead to...
High suicide rates.

And these are not children raised in third-world, war-ravaged countries. We don't need to be refugees on the run for our very lives to be afraid. To be human is to experience fear.

The key is to be honest. Acknowledge your fears are real and give them to the only true source of refuge, Our Heavenly Father (Psalm 27:1)

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?

Such truth empowers us to flee the bondage of fear and live in the freedom of hope.

I wonder what words from Scripture came as comfort and encouragement to Mary and Joseph as they gathered their things in a moment and escaped in the dark of night before Herod's murderous rampage.

Did they remind each other of the words of promise and hope the angels spoke to them before Jesus was born? Did the chorus of angels "Glory to God in the highest" ring in their ears as they made their way south?

Or in the words of another Psalm (121) - *I lift my eyes to the hills, where does my help come from?* In other words, In whom do we trust?

Which is a different question than, What do we hope for? We might answer that question with any number of things; Each of us has our own individual hopes and dreams for the future: own your own business, have a family, graduating from college, traveling... Our own personal

hopes may or may not become reality, there are simply no guarantees, no fool-proof formulas for success. Which is why none of these can address our deepest fears and longings.

It's clear, the gospel is not some fairy tale from the Middle East! The hope of Christmas has absolutely nothing to do with Santa Claus, Frosty the Snowman, or receiving the latest device, gadget or gift.

The miracle is that from his birth on Christmas Day to the crucifixion on Good Friday, Jesus, not just the son of God but God himself, lived among us. The good news is that through his death and resurrection your sins are forgiven and you are a child of the Creator. As radical as it sounds, God, motivated by raging passionate love, does this for you and for all of creation.

The point is we can have complete confidence in our God. We have God's promise that he will never leave nor forsake us and that in all circumstances God's grace will be sufficient for us. But, obviously living in hope does not mean we escape suffering or hardship.

What it does mean is that this living hope sustains us through good times and difficult times as well; despite the grave danger they encountered. Joseph and Mary trusted God to provide them a way to escape; and the hope that sustained them is the same hope we have in Christ Jesus.

Even with all the war, poverty, injustice, and discontent with which we are bombarded daily, and the tremendous temptation to hunker down, just hang on, or to run away. God says, WRONG! Because just as God commanded Mary and Joseph to flee to Egypt, he also told them when it was time to return to Israel.

And this is what makes this angel message different from the others we've looked at. Here it's all about God's commands, God's guidance, God's instructions. God does indeed comfort us with words of assurance, Fear Not, and the promise of his presence; but he will also point us in the right direction - a new direction - and say GO! RUN! The new life I have for you is that way...

So, how do we know where God is sending us? How do we know we're going the right way? Well, I have always experienced God's commanding as a little scary and lot of hope!

In 1525 in Germany, the Protestant Reformation was only eight years old and with war on the horizon, the whole movement was threatening to fall apart. Martin Luther was a wanted man, he faced immense pressure from his own supporters; and many, including Luther himself, thought the end of the world was imminent. So how did he respond in the midst of fear and doubt?

He did the unexpected. Much to the shock and anger of those around him, Luther got married to Katherine Von Bora. His contemporaries accused him of giving in to the desires of the flesh when grave matters of the spirit were at stake. But the fact is that this was an act of tremendous hope and faith in the midst of great fear.

Today also is a tremendous time of fear and opportunity. The world is looking for a reason to hope - WE are looking for a reason to hope! As we begin 2016, let's not be afraid, because God is with us.

So let's go wherever he sends us, because I KNOW he doesn't want us to stay in Bethlehem.

Amen.