

And the Shepherds Were Sore Afraid

Luke 2: 8-12

Sermon notes from the pulpit of
First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
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Not long ago, I was talking about this scene from Luke's gospel in a bible study at Windsor of Savoy. When I mentioned the shepherds were afraid when the angel showed up, a woman started shaking her head. (These saints always keep me straight.) I paused. She piped up.

"That's not how I learned it," she said.

"Learned what?" I asked.

"The shepherds weren't just afraid," she said. "They were *sore afraid*."

And she's right. That Greek word suggests fear, anxiety, reverence, reluctance, and alarm. What the New Revised Standard Version translates as "terrified"—*The shepherds were terrified*—the King James Bible translates as "sore afraid." Other translations say "very afraid" or "greatly afraid." The Wycliff Bible says "they dreaded with a great dread." But the King James Bible translates that Greek word (phobeomai)^[1] as "sore afraid." The use of the word "sore" suggests physical pain, affliction, and emotional hurt. The shepherds are encompassed by an aching and painful fear. They are seized by it.

The shepherds were sore afraid.

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We know about being afraid, don't we?

There is a lot we are afraid about. If my math is right, 247-years and 1-day ago, Thomas Paine wrote in the first winter of the American Revolution, "These are the times that try men's souls." He could be speaking of every age.

We afraid for our elderly parents. We are afraid for our kids. We are afraid of spiders. We are afraid of getting stuck in elevators. We are afraid that the world is passing us by and we're going to miss it because we can't remember the password to our computer anymore. Our smart phone is smarter than we are. And we are afraid.

Certainly, like us, the shepherds were afraid of the unknown. They were facing cosmic change. They might have been afraid not only of the angel but of the angel's message. *The messiah is coming? Our world might turn upside down and everything we know and depend on might change?* The angel said he brought good news of great joy. But the shepherds were afraid.

We know about being afraid, don't we?

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Greg Garrett, in a blog for the Seminary of the Southwest^[2], wrote about a show at an Austin music club (The Contentinal).

On a Wednesday night a few years back, I was at the Continental Club on South Congress. At the end of his set, Jon Dee Graham looked out into the darkened room, and he paused for just a moment, clearly trying to put together what he wanted to say in closing.

What he said was this: "Don't be so afraid. You don't have to be so afraid." . . .

We look around, and the world seems so dark and dangerous that we don't know what we're supposed to do next, and we sometimes forget that the battle that truly matters has already been fought—and won— on our behalf.

This Advent, we are again anticipating Christ's coming, living into our annual reminder that God loves us, suffers alongside us, and would do anything to draw us into abundant life with him.

Annie Lamott has said that the most profound spiritual truth she knows is this: in the darkest times, just when it seems as though there is no way for Love to conquer all, it does.

And so:

Don't be so afraid.

You don't have to be so afraid.

* * *

I appreciate an Americana musician telling me at the end of a concert not to be afraid, but I don't buy it. And I appreciate a novelist and theologian Greg Garrett telling me to fear not. I don't buy it from him, either. And, like the shepherds, I don't even buy it from an angel of the Lord. What does that angel say to those sore and terrified shepherds? He says, "Do not be afraid."

But there's a lot to be afraid about. No matter how much we are soothed by those we love urging us not to be afraid, being afraid is hard to shake, because the things we fear are often very, very real.

But the angel is right.

God invites us to let go of our fear. God invites us to trust God. God invites us to calm down and to breathe and to remember God has got us. God's hands are so big, nobody can fall out. Whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. Nothing will separate us from the life-giving love of God. The angel is right: Do not be afraid.

God has come to us, right at the scariest time, smack dab into the most frightening places. God waits with us in the ER and in the foxhole. Emmanuel means God-with-us, and God *is* with us.

Anna Carter Florence, commenting on this text^[3], says Bethlehem was a "perfect storm of misery." The powers that be—and Luke names them: Caesar Augustus and Quirinius—along with Herod were harsh rulers of an occupying empire that was squeezing those shepherds and everyone else with violence and oppressive taxes. Yet, and this is vitally important in Luke's telling of the nativity, "Not even Quirinius can halt the purposes of God. The powers and principalities of this earth may be at work, but they will never defeat the Prince of Peace."

Yes, there's a lot to be afraid about. I sometimes have sleepless nights, too. But there's a lot to be thankful for, also. God has moved into the neighborhood. "There is faint music in the night/ And pale wings fanned by silver flight."^[4] Faithful men and women have taken this good news of great joy to heart. We are joining hands together in love, in love, in love. And with hope, with hope we hear again what those angels said

to those terrified shepherds who stood together and were sore afraid. The angels said to the shepherds (and us), "Do not be afraid."

* * *

I close this morning not with fear, but with hope. I close with the words of Bruce Reyes-Chow. Bruce is the former moderator of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and he wrote these words when he learned that leaders of Christian denominations in Bethlehem voted to cancel all public celebrations of Christmas. It's simply too unsafe to celebrate, on the one hand, and, on the other, impossible to have a celebration when the country is at war.

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no christmas in bethlehem: a litany

how can we celebrate christmas, when there is no christmas in bethlehem?

By Bruce Reyes-Chow

o little town of bethlehem,
bombs fly overhead and your buildings lie in ruin
people flee for safety
neighbor turns on neighbor
and governments debate your worth
[inhale/exhale]
how can we celebrate christmas
when there is no christmas in bethlehem?

o bethlehem, we want to tell it from the mountain
yet people are taking cover
not knowing what tomorrow may hold
hoping there is a tomorrow to be had at all
[inhale/exhale]
o church, how can we celebrate christmas
when there is no christmas in bethlehem?

o bethlehem, we are desperate to see peace on earth
but we only see bodies, spirits, and minds
suffering from the violence of war
[inhale/exhale]
o church, how can we celebrate christmas
when there is no christmas in bethlehem?

o bethlehem, we yearn to proclaim joy to the world.
but when so many are overcome by sorrow, heartache, grief, and loss
from the deaths of parents, children, friends, and neighbors
[inhale/exhale]
o church, how can we celebrate christmas
when there is no christmas in bethlehem?

o bethlehem, we anticipate the birth of our savior with a silent night, a holy night
but when the silence that blankets far too many
is the silence of a world that watches suffering from afar and does not act
[inhale/exhale]
o church, how can we celebrate christmas
when there is no christmas in Bethlehem?

and yet, o people, somehow we still hear
the angels sweetly singing —

in being present to the suffering of others
hope overcomes despair

in defying systems of violence
peace overwhelms war

in living into our collective humanity
joy is free to all

and in breaking through hearts of hate
love has the final word

may we all soon believe and know
that jesus christ is born^[5]

AMEN

Luke 2: 8-12 8 Now in that same region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 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: 11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah,^[b] the Lord. 12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”

^[1] φοβέομαι (phobeomai) **Strong:** G5399 GK: G5828 has an active form, φοβέω (G5828), but only occurs as a passive (deponent) in our literature, to fear, dread, Mt. 10:26; 14:5; to fear reverentially, to reverence, Mk. 6:20; Lk. 1:50; Acts 10:2; Eph. 5:33; Rev. 11:18; to be afraid to do a thing, Mt. 2:22; Mk. 9:32; to be reluctant, to scruple, Mt. 1:20; to fear, be apprehensive, Acts 27:17; 2 Cor. 11:3; 12:20; to be fearfully anxious, Heb. 4:1; absol. to be fearful, afraid, alarmed, Mt. 14:27; 17:6, 7; Mk. 16:8; to be fearfully impressed, Rom. 11:20

^[2] <https://ssw.edu/advent-meditations-saturday-december-16/>

^[3] *A is for Alabaster: 52 Reflections on the Stories of Scripture*, Anna Carter Florence, Westminster/John Knox: 2023, pp. 180-183, *Quirinius*.

^[4] *There Is Faint Music*, anthem text/Nancy Buckley, music/Dan Forrest.

^[5] This litany was written by Rev. Bruce Reyes-Chow for the [Interfaith Movement for Human Integrity](#) and was inspired by the photo from the [Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church's Nativity scene in Bethlehem and the cancellation of Christmas celebrations in the West Bank](#). Please feel free to use this litany with attribution to Rev. Bruce Reyes-Chow (ig/[@breveschow](#)) and the Interfaith Movement for Human Integrity (ig/[@im4humanintegrity](#)). See the [Instagram post](#) for social reposting