

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.