

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, December 9, 2007**

FEAR NOT

Luke 2:1-14

Angels, as Madeleine L'Engle once pointed out, often appear when they are least expected. That is one of the wonders of angels. There is something about them that evokes a response of fear when they appear to mere mortals like you and me. In the Bible, people to whom angels appear are often struck with terror in their hearts. And the message of the angels often begins with the words "Fear not" or "Do not be afraid."

We see this in Luke 2, in the announcement of the Savior's birth to a group of shepherds caring for their flocks in the fields outside Bethlehem. Listen again to what Luke says beginning in verse 8:

There were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be to all the people."

(Luke 2:8-10)

The first response of the shepherds to the appearance of the angel was one of fear. Terror struck their hearts.

This reaction is not unusual. If we go back to Luke 1, there we find the account of the appearance of the angel Gabriel to Zechariah the priest, who would become the father of John the Baptist. Zechariah had gone to Jerusalem to perform his priestly duty. While there he was chosen to be the priest who would enter the Holy Place in the temple to offer incense to the Lord on behalf of the people. Suddenly and without warning, Zechariah found himself face to face with an angel. How did Zechariah respond? Verse 12 says: "When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and gripped with fear."

What did the angel say to him? Verse 13: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayer has been heard." The angel went on to tell Zechariah that he and his wife Elizabeth would have a son who would be used by God to prepare the people of Israel for the coming of the promised Messiah (1:13-17). Zechariah did not believe what Gabriel told him. It seemed impossible to him, since both he and Elizabeth were well advanced in years. But God proved faithful to His promise, and within a year, Elizabeth gave birth to their son to whom they gave the name John.

Before John was born, when Elizabeth was in her sixth month of pregnancy, Luke tells us that God sent Gabriel to Nazareth in Galilee to give a message to Mary, a virgin engaged to be married to Joseph. When the angel appeared to Mary and spoke to her, she was

troubled by what he said, wondering what was behind his greeting to her. She must have been afraid, because Gabriel said to her: “Do not be afraid, Mary. You have found favor with God” (Luke 1:30). Once again, the appearance of the angel evoked the response of fear.

In Matthew 1, there is yet another visit by an angel, this time to Joseph, Mary’s husband-to-be, in a dream. In this case it was not the angel’s appearance but the circumstances of Mary’s pregnancy that gave rise to fear in his heart. Being a godly man, Joseph did not want to expose Mary to public disgrace, so he had determined to take care of things quietly. But an angel appeared to him in a dream and said: “Joseph, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because her pregnancy is Spirit-conceived. It is the Holy Spirit who has made her pregnant. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus (which means *The Lord saves*), because he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:20-21).

In the movie *The Nativity Story* which was released last year, there is a scene that captures the predicament in which Joseph found himself. Throughout the movie, Joseph is portrayed – appropriately – as an honorable man, a man of noble character, a man who follows God’s leading even when the future is uncertain. In this particular scene, Mary and Joseph are on the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, where they are going to register for the census. They have stopped for the evening by the Sea of Galilee and have just roasted a fish for their supper. Mary looks up from preparing the meal and says with a smile: “The baby is moving.” Joseph looks on with a mixture of excitement and concern. Then Mary says: “You never really told me of your dream.”

Joseph looks as if he might answer, but then turns away.

“No, really,” Mary insists. “Tell me.”

Joseph leans toward her and says: “The angel came to me. He told me the child within you had been conceived by the Holy Spirit and that I should not be afraid.”

Mary asks: “Are you afraid?”

“Yes,” Joseph whispers. “Are you?”

“Yes,” says Mary. They both laugh nervously, and Mary continues: “Do you ever wonder when we’ll know? When we’ll know he’s more than just a child? Will it be something he says, a look in his eye?”

And Joseph says: “I wonder... if I will even be able to teach him anything.”

A different kind of fear. But the same message from the angel: “Do not be afraid.” Fear not. I believe that is a message we need to hear from the Lord today. In Advent 2007.

Let me ask you: What are you afraid of? Is fear a factor in your life?

There is a web site called Phobialist.com that identifies and lists more than 500 kinds of fear. Among them are *homilophobia*, which is the fear of sermons, and *peladophobia*, which is the fear of bald people. I hope none of you suffers from either of these!

Dave Barry has written that “all of us are born with a set of instinctive fears – of falling, of the dark, of lobsters, of falling on lobsters in the dark, of speaking before a Rotary Club, and of the words ‘Some Assembly Required.’” Perhaps you can identify with some of these. Or maybe not.

Dave Barry’s humor aside, all of us are susceptible to fear of one kind or another. Some people are afraid of flying. Some people are afraid of heights. Some people are afraid of snakes or spiders or rats or mice. Or maybe all of the above. Some people are afraid of failure. Some people are afraid of success.

Perhaps you live with a daily fear of another terrorist attack like the one six years ago on September 11. Perhaps you recall the fear that gripped our entire region in October 2002 when the D. C. snipers were on the loose. Many of us were afraid even to pump gas at the service station or to walk to and from our vehicles at the supermarket or mall, wondering if we might be the next target of the snipers. Perhaps you live with the fear of being diagnosed with cancer, or some other life-threatening or debilitating disease. Perhaps you are afraid of what you cannot see, afraid of what the future may hold, afraid of what might happen in days or years to come.

THE FEAR OF THE DARK

What are you afraid of? Some people – and it is not always just children – are afraid of the dark. Gardner Taylor, now almost 90 years of age, was one of the most famous black preachers of the 20th century. As a young man, during the Depression of the 1930s, he was preaching at a small church in Louisiana. Electricity was just coming into that part of the country, and Taylor was out in a rural, black church that had just one light bulb hanging down from the ceiling to light up the whole sanctuary. He was preaching away at a service one evening, and in the middle of his sermon, all of a sudden, the electricity went out. The building went pitch black. Being a young preacher, Taylor didn’t know what to do or say. He stumbled around until one of the elderly deacons sitting in the back of the church called out: “Preach on, preacher! We can still see Jesus in the dark!”

It is true: With the eyes of faith, you can still see Jesus, no matter how dark it is – or seems to be – all around you. And the good news is that even if we have trouble seeing Him in the dark, Jesus can still see us in the dark. He will never let us out of His sight.

God Himself has said: “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you” (Deuteronomy 31:6; Hebrews 13:5). So we can say with confidence: “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid” (Psalm 118:6-7; Hebrews 13:6).

In his prayer in Psalm 139, David acknowledged God’s constant and continuing presence with us, even if we should seek to hide from Him. He prayed:

If I say, “Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,” even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you (139:11-12).

Even in the dark He sees us. And He is with us, whether we can see Him or not. Jesus, the Word who became flesh and made His dwelling among us (John 1:14), the One whose coming we celebrate at Christmas, is the light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness will not overcome it (John 1:5).

And as David reminds us in 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?

Should you find yourself in the darkness, whether it is the darkness of a thunderstorm or a power outage, or the darkness of uncertainty about what God is doing in your life or what God wants to do in your life, never forget that Jesus can see you in the dark, that He is with you in the dark (for He has given you His word that He will never leave you nor forsake you), and that the light of His love and truth will continue to shine on you, even when there is darkness all around you.

So take to heart the message of God’s angel-messengers and fear not.

THE FEAR OF EMBARRASSMENT

In addition to the fear of the dark, some of us – perhaps all of us – know in our own experience the fear of embarrassment, the fear of being exposed or found out for some past or present indiscretion or act of foolishness. It may be an extramarital affair, such as David’s with Bathsheba. It may be illegal drug use. It may be a shady business deal or cheating on your taxes. It may be a lie that has taken on a life of its own or a prank that wasn’t as harmless as you thought. To have the skeletons in your closet rattle their bones out in the open must be one of a politician’s worst nightmares.

But it is not just a politician’s nightmare. This fear of being exposed or embarrassed by what you have done can torment any of us. The fear of having your secret sins discovered can haunt you for years and years. And it can rob you of the peace and joy you long for.

But there is a way to be set free from this fear. It is the way of honest confession of our sins, the way of repentance and forgiveness. Proverbs 28:13 says: “He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy.”

All of us have done things we’re ashamed of, or things we ought to be ashamed of. Satan will do his best to pull us down by reminding us of those things we’ve done, even things that happened years ago. He wants to weigh us down with a load of guilt, and so to rob us of the blessings of God’s mercy and grace.

But God is a God of mercy and grace. With Him, as it says in Psalm 130:4, there is forgiveness. Forgiveness is God's habit. He stands ready at every moment to forgive us for our sins and to free us from the weight of a guilty conscience. He is not only ready. He is able.

If we think we can hide our sin from God, if we try to pretend that we have no sin, we're only fooling ourselves. God knows about it already. Nothing we do is hidden from God's sight, including those things that no one else knows about.

Confession of our sin in a spirit of true repentance brings forgiveness. And when you have been forgiven, you need not live in fear. Because a forgiven person is a free person.

So, if you have turned to the Lord Jesus Christ in a spirit of repentance, if you have confessed your sins to Him and renounced them, if you have placed your trust in the saving work of Christ on your behalf and received God's forgiveness for your sins – whatever they are – I urge you to take to heart the message of God's angel messengers and fear not.

THE FEAR OF GOD'S WRATH

But hear this and take it to heart: If you are running away from God, if you are just going through the motions of being a Christian but you are really living for yourself, if you have said "No" to God's rule in your life, then you have good reason to be afraid. Afraid of His wrath. Afraid of His righteous anger and just judgment.

Jesus gave this warning to His followers: "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear Him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear Him" (Matthew 10:28; Luke 12:4-5).

In Hebrews 10:26-31 we find these sobering words: "If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a person deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know the One who said: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' and again: 'The Lord will judge His people.' It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

If you have turned away from God in your heart, if you are playing games with God, if you honor Him with your lips but your heart is far from Him, if you have arrogantly set yourself in opposition to God, then you should rightly be afraid of God's holy wrath. For it is real and it is righteous. And it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

But if you have been saved by God's grace, if you have been made right with God through the gift of Christ's sacrifice on the cross for you, if you belong to Christ by faith, if you are walking with Him by faith and living your life under His Lordship, then you need never fear the wrath or anger or judgment of God.

There is no need to cower before Him or to hide your face from Him, for He is a gracious, kind, loving, forgiving Heavenly Father who delights in giving good gifts to His children, which is what we are through faith in Christ (1 John 3:1; John 1:12). His posture toward us is one of love. Unconditional love. Perfect love. And perfect love, it says in 1 John 4:18, drives out fear. When you understand that you are loved by God and that you will always be loved, when you remember that He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, you know that you don't need to be afraid.

So take to heart the message of God's angel-messengers and fear not.

THE FEAR OF DEATH

There is one more fear I want to talk about this morning: The fear of death. The Bible tells us in Hebrews 9:27 that everyone is destined to die once. Unless Jesus returns first, every one of us will have an appointment with death. For some of us, our appointment may come soon. For others of us, it may be a long time off.

But nobody knows. I'm sure Sean Taylor, the talented Washington Redskins football player who was shot to death two weeks ago at the age of 24 by intruders in his home, had no idea his life on this earth was about to end.

I recently came across a sermon preached as a young man by Karl Barth, the famous German theologian, on the Sunday after the sinking of the *Titanic* in April 1912. Barth's text for the sermon was Psalm 103:15-17:

As for man, his days are like grass, he flourishes like a flower of the field;
the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more.
But from everlasting to everlasting the Lord's love is with those who fear Him.

Our days are like grass. We are here today and gone tomorrow. Every one of us will have an appointment with death. Just like all those who perished with the *Titanic*.

If you are afraid of death, you've got lots of company. But the Bible tells us that one reason Jesus came was to free us from the fear of death. Jesus took on our flesh and blood and shared in our humanity so that by His death on the cross He might defeat the one who holds the power of death – that is, the devil – and free all those who throughout their lives were enslaved by their fear of death (Hebrews 2:14-15). In Christ, you see, we don't have to be scared to death of death.

It is clear that Paul, in Philippians 1, had no fear of death. He said: “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (1:21). He expressed his desire to go and be with Christ “which is better by far” (1:23), but he was willing to continue living in the body, if this would serve God’s purposes.

Death, of course, is a great unknown for us. None of us know what it is like to die. But we do know that God is trustworthy. We know, as David says in Psalm 23, that even when we find ourselves in the valley of the shadow of death, we need fear no evil, for the Lord is with us. And He will bring us safely to the other side.

At funeral services I sometimes tell the story of John Todd, a 19th century pastor, whose parents had both died when he was just six years old. After their deaths, he was sent to live with his aunt, who loved him and cared for him as though he were her own son. Many years later, when Todd was in his 40s, he received word that his aunt was dying and that she was afraid of her approaching death. She wrote her nephew a letter, expressing her fears and asking him what death and eternity would be like. This is what he wrote back to her:

“It is now 35 years since I, a little boy of six, was left quite alone in the world. You sent me word that you would give me a home and be a kind mother to me. I have never forgotten the day when I made the long journey of ten miles to your house. I can still recall my disappointment when, instead of coming for me yourself, you sent your servant Caesar to fetch me. I well remember my tears and my anxiety as, perched high on your horse and clinging tight to Caesar, I rode off to my new home.

“Night fell before we finished the journey, and as it grew dark, I became lonely and afraid. ‘Do you think she’ll go to bed before we get there?’ I asked anxiously. ‘Oh no,’ Caesar said, ‘she’ll wait up for you. When we get out of these woods you’ll see her candle shining in the window.’ Presently we did ride out into the clearing and there, sure enough, was your candle. I remember you were waiting at the door, that you lifted me, a tired and bewildered little boy, down from the horse. You had a fire burning on the hearth, a hot supper waiting for me on the stove. After supper you took me to my new room, you heard me say my prayers, and then you sat beside me until I fell asleep.

“Someday soon, God will send for you, to take you to a new home. Don’t fear the summons, the strange journey, or the messenger of death. God can be trusted to do as much for you as you were kind enough to do for me so many years ago. At the end of the road you will find love and a welcome waiting, and you will be safe in God’s care. I shall watch you and pray for you until you are out of sight, and then wait for the day when I shall make the journey myself and find you waiting at the end of the road to greet me.”

You may be young and healthy now, and the day of your appointment with death may seem far off (though it could come in an unexpected moment any day). Or, because of your advancing years and declining health, you may be facing the journey very soon. Or perhaps you are dealing with the recent – or impending – death of someone you care

about deeply. Whatever the case, if you belong to Christ, if your heart is settled in Him, you need not fear death.

A mystery it is. And the Bible says it is our enemy – the last enemy to be defeated (1 Corinthians 15:26). But take heart, for the last enemy doesn't have the last word. Jesus does. And we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us (Romans 8:37). He came to win the victory over sin and death, and to set us free from the fear of death. Death may be our enemy, but O, what a friend we have in Jesus.

So take to heart the message of God's angel-messengers and fear not.

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.