

Four Blessings:

1. No Fear

First in the 2017 Advent sermon series
by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
December 3, 2017—First Sunday of Advent

- Luke 2:10 The angel said to them, “Don't be afraid! I am here with good news for you, which will bring great joy to all the people.” (Good News Translation)
- Psalm 34:1-8 I will always thank the LORD; I will never stop praising him.
²I will praise him for what he has done; may all who are oppressed listen and be glad!
³Proclaim with me the LORD's greatness; let us praise his name together!
⁴I prayed to the LORD, and he answered me; he freed me from all my fears.
⁵The oppressed look to him and are glad; they will never be disappointed.
⁶The helpless call to him, and he answers; he saves them from all their troubles.
⁷His angel guards those who honor the LORD and rescues them from danger.
⁸Find out for yourself how good the LORD is. Happy are those who find safety with him.
(Good News Translation)
- Theme: The angel's message is a blessing and encouragement to us – to live with no fear, entrusting our lives to the guidance and providence of God who came among us in Jesus the Son.

Let us pray: Open our ears to hear your word to us today, Attentive God. Open our hearts to receive your blessing. Open our hands so we can be a blessing to others. In prayerful anticipation we boldly ask this in the name and power of Jesus, born to be your Son, our Brother, our Savior and Guide. Amen.

Christmas sure takes up a lot of our time.

Since today is the *First* Sunday of Advent, that signals the first of *four* Sundays we devote to preparing spiritually for Christmas--embracing the unique gift of God's love made incarnate in the birth of Jesus. Just three weeks from tonight we'll celebrate Christmas Eve – on that night we'll offer three services here. Christmas itself is just one day, of course, but it takes about four weeks of our time to get ready.

As you see and hear wherever you turn these days, since Thanksgiving we've been in the midst of thirty-two days where shopping is touted as the most important component of any observance of the holy day of Christmas. And when it comes to shopping, let's not limit ourselves to even thirty-two days; I know many people (including one I'm married to) who have this knack of keeping their eyes peeled *throughout the year* in case they spot some item that would make “the perfect Christmas gift” for someone on their list.

Yes, Christmas takes up a lot of time. Our celebrations of Christmas occupy us not just on Christmas Day or even Christmas Eve but for days and weeks and even months leading up to Christmas. How did we manage to make Christmas so complicated, so involved, so overwhelming? What if we could see beyond the clutter of holiday commitments and immense expectations and bone-wearying tasks? Wouldn't it be nice if we could simplify all that?

Well, that's why for Advent this year I'm having us focus on one verse of scripture — a verse of scripture every one of us has heard many, many times, a verse that we probably have memorized (more or less). I'm focusing on it because this one verse tells us of "Four Blessings" that God gives us in the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem.

The verse is from the gospel according to Luke. Luke's is one of the two gospels that tells of the birth of Jesus. The gospels of Mark and John don't mention the birth of Jesus. Matthew's gospel is the other gospel that tells of Jesus' birth, but Matthew focuses on different aspects compared to Luke.

For example, Matthew tells of Wise Men — Magi — traveling from afar to find the baby born to be the King of the Jewish people. But Matthew never describes any "shepherds abiding in the fields" nor does he mention a livestock feed trough — a manger — for the baby's cradle.

For his part, while Luke's account doesn't mention any Wise Men, he does tell of the Holy Family having to resort to a manger as the baby's cradle, because there was "no room in the inn." He also tells of shepherds coming to Bethlehem from the countryside to find this special baby.

How did the shepherds learn about Jesus? Luke tells us that while they were minding their own business, camping in the fields while they grazed their flocks, they were visited by a messenger from God. In the Greek language Luke was writing in, the word for messenger was "αγγελος" (*angelos*) or "angel." What did this messenger, this angel, look like? Luke didn't say. But Luke wrote that when they finished their message-delivery assignment the angel and his (or her?) buddies went "back into heaven". Over the centuries, artists figured that messenger/angels would need to have wings like a bird to be able to ascend heavenward... hence, the image that's so common now.

How, exactly, did the messenger/angel appear to the shepherds? Did it float down from the sky? Maybe. The Bible doesn't say. But it's just as possible that the angel came walking up the hillside through the grazing sheep. Maybe it simply materialized out of the campfire smoke. However the messenger showed up, it was unexpected. That's why the first thing it said to the shepherds was, "'Don't be afraid!' Then the angel explains, "I am here with good news for you, which will bring great joy to all the people."

The shepherds would have had good reason to be afraid. If they could be completely caught off-guard by the approach of this apparently well-intentioned person, perhaps a predator could have sneaked up on their flock... or a bandit could have sneaked up on them. The messenger/angel's unexpected appearance reminded the shepherds that they and their flocks were in constant danger so the shepherds could never allow themselves to drop their guard.

And yet, the angel's first words to them were "Don't be afraid." When's the last time someone said to you "Don't be afraid..."? When you were a novice driver venturing away from the safety and calm of a parking lot and going out on a real road for the first time? As you were being prepared to undergo a medical procedure? On your first day at a new school? Leaving your child at college? While taxiing in an airplane?

Maybe you said it to yourself: "Don't be afraid." I did. I still remember clearly the last day of our honeymoon. We went to Walt Disney World. My sister had urged us to be sure to ride the then-newest attraction. It was an indoor roller-coaster called "Space Mountain." Neither Mary nor I had become coaster enthusiasts yet — she still hasn't — and when the car launched us down the rails into the darkness of this indoor ride, we both were freaked out. But with my new bride sitting right in front of me I kept saying into her ear, "It's almost over, it's almost over,"

hoping that saying that might reassure her a bit, and hoping that I wouldn't act as afraid as I felt.

No fear. That's the first of the angel's blessings. The messenger assured those rustic Judean shepherds that they had nothing to fear from its sudden appearance. The angel went on to tell them that God had acted to deliver them, to protect them, to save them: God had sent a savior in the birth of the Christ, the Messiah, God's long-anticipated Chosen One. At that moment in history, the future of humanity was changed: our God of love and mercy, wisdom and strength, brought those divine qualities into our sphere of human living in the birth of Jesus the Son.

With Jesus born among us we're saved from having to live in fear. Oh, life will still give us reason for concern: war or threat of conflict; losing employment; whether we're being governed effectively; illness or injury or disease or declining function in our bodies; society struggling to learn how to live together respectfully and cooperatively; how the economy affects our day-to-day lives. There are always aspects of life we can't foresee or control that can be a concern. But we needn't live in fear. We needn't ever fear that God has abandoned us, leaving our welfare solely to our own devices and cleverness. The prophetic title given to the Bethlehem baby says it all: "Emmanuel" means "God is with us."

With Jesus born among us we're rescued from a whirlpool of worry. Not that we'll always have all the answers and know everything that's going to happen. No. But now we know that God loves us so much that God gave the only Son. It's not like God stands at a distance and smugly says, "Well, let's see if they can figure this out." No, God is "all in" for us. As St. Paul wrote in Romans Chapter 8, "If God is with us, who (or what) can be against us?"¹

As you wade through your to-do list and check off your shopping list and update your Christmas card list and fill your calendar with holiday soirees and get-togethers and programs, take a breath from time to time and remember the simplicity of the angel's message to the shepherds: "Don't be afraid." For that message is also a blessing and encouragement to us – to live with no fear, not letting fear overwhelm us. "Don't be afraid" is an invitation to entrust our lives to the guidance and providence of God who came among us in the infant named Jesus.

[sermons: se20171203; © 2017 Jon M. Fancher]

¹ Romans 8:31 Good News Translation