

## **Do Not Be Afraid**

*December 24, 2008*

(The Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ - Year B)

Luke 2: 1-20

*St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas*

Merry Christmas to you all!

I might have told you all this sometime before, but when I was a little boy, I had terrible troubles with my ears.

I got ear infections and ear aches all the time, it seemed.

Whenever I had a bad ear ache, my mother would take me to see Dr. Herndon.

Dr. Herndon would look into my ear canal with his scope and would make a judgment on how bad my ear infection was.

If the ear infection was bad, he would say that he was going to give me some relief.

This meant that he would lance my ear drum, in the office, using local anesthetic.

It was always a very painful procedure.

However, whenever I would get my ear lanced, my mom would tell me: "Now I know that you are afraid.

But, you can grab hold of my hand and you can squeeze my hand as hard as you want to while Dr. Herndon is operating on your ear."

Placing the surgical instrument into my ear, Dr. Herndon would say:

"Now, you are going to feel a little discomfort."

(Which was the understatement of the year).

And the whole time, I would squeeze the dickens out of my mother's hand, until it was over - and I would wipe the tears from my eyes.

I always knew that I was not alone - and that I could squeeze my mom's hand whenever I was afraid.

Two thousand years ago, outside of Bethlehem, some shepherds were in their fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night.

An angel of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

The shepherds were not just afraid - they were terrified, big time. In fact, the shepherds were so afraid, that in the original Greek language of the New Testament, the writer of Luke's Gospel says that the shepherds "feared a great fear."

In the midst of the shepherd's great fear, the angel says to them:  
"Do not be afraid,  
Because I am bringing you good news.  
For to you is born this day your Savior."

In the midst of the shepherd's great fear, the angel does not just tell the shepherds:  
"Do not be afraid."  
And leave the message at that.

Instead, the angel of the Lord tells the shepherds not to be afraid, and then,  
The angel follows up by telling the shepherd's *why* they should not be afraid.  
The shepherds should not be afraid because the hand of God has punched through the dark night into our world.  
The hand of God is now with us - and we can squeeze that hand of God whenever we are afraid.

It seems to me that this Christmas Eve, many of us are afraid or that we fear a great fear.  
Susan and I have both noticed that the Christmas lights in our neighborhood don't seem as bright this year.  
We have both noticed that our mailbox is not as full of Christmas cards this year as in the past.

Maybe the economic fear and uncertainty that is gripping this world has caused folks to cut back on electricity and on postage for Christmas cards.

Whatever the reason is, the world today seems wrapped in fear. So then, it seems very appropriate this Christmas to hear again that message of the angel in the Bethlehem fields telling us:  
"Do not be afraid.  
Because now you can squeeze God's hand any time you want.

For you are not alone.”

By coming to this worship service tonight, you made the decision not to be alone this year for Christmas.

Even though many of us are afraid this year, in a world that is at war, is in a recession, and is struggling with issues of health care and global warming and education,

Even though many of us fear a great fear,

We have come together tonight to squeeze each other’s hands and to say to each other:

“The Peace of the Lord be always with you.”

In a few minutes, when we have the exchange of the Peace, I want us all to remember, as we reach out our hands, that we are not alone.

The shepherds in that field outside of Bethlehem were not alone when the angel of the Lord came and terrified them.

And, in some sense, those shepherds in that field were the first Church.

Because I bet that those shepherds squeezed each other’s hands when they ran to Bethlehem to see the new baby Jesus.

I bet that when they arrived at the manger, that those shepherds got their hands on that baby Jesus and held him in their arms.

And I imagine that Mary and Joseph and the shepherds then all turned to each other and said:

“Do not be afraid. Because we are not alone.”

We are not alone in this world, because Jesus shows us that God is with us.

Jesus is with us when we go to work each day, because Jesus worked with his hands.

Jesus is with us when we grieve the death of a loved one, because Jesus cried at the grave of his friend, Lazarus.

Jesus is with us when we are in pain, because Jesus knows the pain of the Cross.

Jesus is with us when our retirement fund collapses on Wall Street, when the doctor pronounces a terminal diagnosis, when our children go in wayward directions.

And the hand that reaches out for us to squeeze - is the hand of Christ’s

Body, the hand of people like you and like me who make up God's Church.

And just as the shepherds in the Bethlehem fields became the first church - and reached out a hand to Mary and to Joseph and to Jesus,

On this night, Christmas Eve 2008, *we* are the Church.

*We* are that hand of God.

For we are God with us to each other.

Everyone is afraid about something.

We are afraid of heights and of unemployment.

We are afraid of snakes and of loneliness.

So it is really not fair for me to tell you:

“Do not be afraid”

Without telling you some good news to go along with that directive.

For the angel of Bethlehem says:

“Do not be afraid, *because* I am bringing you good news.”

For the Good News is that the hand of God is now made of human flesh - a hand that we can squeeze and hold and grab onto whenever we are afraid.

The Good News of Christmas is - that we are not alone.

“For I am convinced - that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will ever, *ever*, be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”<sup>1</sup>

AMEN.

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 8: 38-39