

Homily: How will you respond?**“Do not be afraid”**

You might be surprised to know those are the words the angel of the Lord said to different people during the first Christmas. The angel repeated the words three times, which is a sign of great emphasis in the Hebrew language.

The angel Gabriel first said to Zechariah, *“Do not be afraid. God heard your prayer”* (Luke 1:13). The angel told Zechariah “do not fear” and gave him good news: his wife, Elizabeth, was pregnant. Her child would be the prophet who prepared the way for the Lord.

The second time was six months later, when God sent the angel to Nazareth to Mary, a woman engaged to be married to Joseph. The angel said, *“Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God”* (Luke 1:30) and *“nothing will be impossible with God”* (v37). The angel told Mary she would miraculously conceive and give birth to a baby boy. She’d name him Jesus. He’d be the Son of God. Wow!

The third time the angel of the Lord spoke was to the shepherds. Jesus was born and lying in the manger. The angel appeared and stood in front of the angels and God’s glory was like the light of day. Clearly, this was no ordinary man and so the shepherds were terrified. The angel said to them, *“Do not be afraid. I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people: the Lord, the Savior, who is the Messiah, is born today in the city of David”* (vv10-11).

Three times God sent the angel to earth. Three times the angel delivered God’s message: *“Do not be afraid.”* The people who heard it responded in three different ways.

Zechariah, the priest, didn’t believe the angel and so he was struck mute until the baby was born, when he announced to the world, *“His name is John”* (1:63) and then Zechariah said, *“God remembers his holy covenant, which he made with Abraham, and so we can serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness”* (vv73b-75).

Mary, the innocent, didn’t doubt. She said to the angel, *“Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word”* (v38). The miracle was complete and the angel departed. Mary later said, *“His*

mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation” (v50), meaning those who are awed by God are those he loves. Nine months later, she gave birth to Jesus in a manger, fulfilling God’s prophecy and changing the universe forever. And, after all she experienced, Luke tells us Mary, “*treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart”* (v19). That means she reflected and thought about the miracle.

Then there’s the last group, the shepherds. The shepherds were working. They were in the fields, watching over the sheep and protecting their flocks while the animals slept. The shepherds had a thankless job. They were on the lowest rung of the career totem pole. That’s one of the reasons they were afraid when the angel appeared.

How did the shepherds respond to God’s message? They believed the angel, talked among themselves and then ran to Bethlehem and found Mary and baby Jesus in the manger. Our fine crew enacted this drama for us today. But the shepherds didn’t stop there. They went around telling everyone they saw what the angel said about the birth of the Messiah. And people were amazed. The shepherds later returned to their work, but they were “*glorifying and praising God”* (v20) for everything they experienced.

Today’s world is a challenging and increasingly frightening place. But we have hope because of what happened in that manger in Bethlehem over 2,000 years ago. Jesus Christ, God’s Son, was born to save us!

How will you respond? Will you disbelieve like Zechariah and so lose your ability to speak about the wonders of God until the work is done? Will you believe in the impossible like Mary, serve God faithfully and completely and reflect on your experience? Or will you be like the shepherds, with our fears calmed by God, who gather together, run to where God is, and then tell everyone the good news, praising God and giving God all the glory?

Whatever path you choose, it requires you go to “all in” for Christ. If you make that move, be ready for a powerful experience: you won’t be afraid anymore but filled with the presence of the Lord. Alleluia!

I pray you are filled with the peace of Christ this Christmas. Amen.

Micah 5:2-5a (NRSV)

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace.

Luke 2:8-20 (NRSV)

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 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: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and 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 heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.