

sermon-12/24/07 Newport Presbyterian Church
“A Christmas Meditation”
Luke 2:1-20

“But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.” (Luke 2:19) There was much to ponder on that first Christmas. Nothing much has changed. There is still much to ponder in our day on this Christmas Eve two thousand years later. Each time we read the Bible, and especially when we read familiar passages of the Bible like this one, we need to quiet our hearts so we might hear God’s Word. That Word has a message for us personally, for us as a church, and, I suspect, for our nation as well.

So, what is it we need to ponder this year in 2007? We live in a messy world. Our newspapers are full of stories about war, cruel dictators, and economic doom. Religious fanatics, whether Muslim or Christian, are a phenomenon that we must come to terms with if we are ever going to have peace. Our passage for this evening speaks to our world just as clearly as it spoke to first century Palestine long ago.

This beloved passage surprisingly has military images that are important for us to consider. When it speaks of the heavenly host joining the angel in the fields, we need to remember the word “host” is another word for army. This beloved Christmas message is brought to us by an army, God’s army.

The angel, along with the heavenly host, brings good news. We call this good news the gospel. Interestingly the word “gospel” originally meant the victory message from the battlefield. This serene little passage that has come to conjure up warm and fuzzy feelings, is littered with military images. God’s army, out of the battlefield of life where sin and injustice wage war with God’s intentions, brings a message of peace when all was dark. The message came to these poor shepherds in an occupied country where even pregnant women could be forced to travel for a census.

That ought to get our attention. God’s army has a different agenda than secular armies that bring words of warning or terror. God’s army brings words of peace. But that is not the only message the angels bring.

Even before the message of peace is the soothing message, “Do not be afraid.” This call to calm our fears is central to Luke’s gospel. It is given three times in the first two chapters. The angel says to Zechariah in 1:13, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard.” Then in 1:30 the angel says to Mary, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.” And here in our passage the angel says to the shepherds in 2:10, “Do not be afraid; for see-I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people. . .”

The gospels start with this message against fear. The gospels also end with the exact same message. Matthew has the angel say to the women at the tomb after Jesus was raised, “Do not be afraid. . .He is not here; for he has been raised. . .” (Matt. 28:5)

Rome's power to intimidate and even take life, is not unlimited. Rome can't thwart God's agenda in Jesus. Do not be afraid.

Immediately following the angel's words to the women are some very important words from the risen Christ. The first words out of his mouth to them, the first message of the resurrection, in other words, are, "Do not be afraid. . ." (Matt. 28:10) Those who have a resurrection faith do not live in fear.

My friends, do not be afraid. Do not be afraid. It is a constant refrain in the gospels. It is a message we desperately need to hear in our day. Our national leaders are giving us the exact opposite message. They want us to be afraid. Be afraid of what the terrorists might do. Be afraid of the economy in all its volatility. Be afraid of those our governors pardon. Be afraid of immigrants.

When we are made afraid, we can be manipulated. We can be led into making terrible decisions or condoning terrible abuses of our civil liberties and humane treatment of our enemies. Fear leads to injustice and often violence.

The Christmas message is many things. It is a wonderfully warm and comforting story about a baby born in a stable. But it, perhaps most importantly this year in 2007, is a story with a message we have to ponder. Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid.

How can we deal with our fears? I want to close with one more word to ponder: manger. One commentator talks about how important the manger is for Luke. He mentions it three times in our passage (vv. 7, 12, 16). "Why? A few scholars have suggested that since a manger is a feeding trough, this is Luke's way of presenting Jesus as God's gift of food for a hungry world."

We can deal with our fears if we feed on Jesus. That is exactly what communion is all about. Communion reminds us it is in this meal shared by the community of faith where we find meaning, peace, strength, hope, love, and the ultimate antidote to fear. As we eat this symbolic meal on this Christmas Eve, let us ponder and accept the message of the angels to us in our day, "Do not be afraid." Merry Christmas. Amen