

December 24th 2021

Christmas Eve; Year C

Isaiah 9: 2-7

Psalm 96: 1-8

Luke 2:1-14

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In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

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!"

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Merry Christmas to everyone! A joy to gather with each of you on this holy night.

A few months ago, I drove to Shrine Mont, our Diocesan conference center, north of Harrisonburg in the mountains. I took a new route that took me not on the interstates, 64 and 81, but on the back roads, a much more pleasant drive than fighting the trucks racing past me at 80 miles per hour!

I enjoyed the small towns and beautiful fall scenery, and I had the unexpected delight of one of my favorite driving activities: reading the messages on church signs.

As I was driving in October I saw lots of notices for Fall Festivals, some advertised Halloween activities, one in particular changed it to Holyween, a name that might not have thrilled the children, but as long as costumes and candy were involved, I imagine it was a success!

I laughed out loud at one fall-themed sign:

“Fall for Jesus
He will Never Leave You”

And as my drive took place a few weeks before the November elections, I appreciated:

“If You are Tired of the Elephant and the Donkey
Try the Lamb”

A much-needed reminder as to who we are called to worship, and not worship!

But a more recent drive showed me a church sign that has stuck with me, not because it was clever or funny, but because it spoke the gospel, it spoke our gospel, for this most holy night.

I was driving towards West Point when I noticed a church up on a hill with this message on their sign:

“People say Fear
God says Fear Not”

We know that our Christmas story, though beautiful, is full of fear. Mary and Joseph both pondered saying yes to God, fearful of the consequences, encouraged by the words of angelic visitors, “Do not be afraid”.

And tonight, the shepherds, on a long, dull evening, suddenly overwhelmed with the light of angels arriving, and like all of us, understandably, first afraid, expecting the worst, and the angel again realizes their fear and says immediately to those shepherds:

“Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people....”

Good news for all, yes, good news for elephant people and donkey people!

The uniting and great news of the birth of the Messiah, the one of whom Isaiah prophesied, the one who will be known as:

*“Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”*

And what of us, remembering tonight the birth of our Savior, as a tiny helpless child? Our Savior born this night, God drawing close to God’s creation, in Jesus, Emmanuel, which translates as: “God with us”.

And what of us, can we too hear that, though people say to us, FEAR, in our sinful ways, we humans try to spread fear of one another, focusing on our differences rather than our unity, can we hear too that God says: FEAR NOT?

Can we hear and believe on this holy night that all humans, are children of God’s heart, each one of us dear to our creator, that the roughly 7 billion of us on earth, that we are all made in God’s image and all beloved children of God’s heart.

God still says to each of us...Fear not.

Can we hear the angels assuring us tonight: Do not be afraid?

To know the realization and to feel the relief that it is not all up to us, that Emmanuel, God with us, is still here, still encircling us in love, walking with us in

the dark valleys and on the mountain tops.

My prayer this Christmas Eve is to remember and put aside all who say FEAR in our world.

And to listen instead with the shepherds for the best of news, Unto us a child is born, our savior, our brother Jesus,

*“Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”*

And to listen daily for the angels calling to us: Do not be afraid.

Amen.