

December 24, 2021 – Luke 2:1-20

There's a wonderful scene in the Christmas classic "A Charlie Brown Christmas" where Charlie Brown goes to Lucy for psychiatric help. She decides that in order help him she needs to pinpoint and label his fears.

So she asks him, do you have a fear of responsibility? Then you have hypengyophobia. Do you have a fear of cats? Then you ailurophasia. Are you afraid of staircases? Then you have climacophobia. If you're afraid of the ocean, then you have thalassophobia. If you're afraid of bridges, then you have gephyrophobia.

And then, finally, she tells him, you could just have pantophobia. What's pantophobia? Why, it's the fear of everything. And with a great shout that sends Lucy flying backwards, Charlie Brown cries out, "That's it!"

Sometimes I wonder if I'm turning into Charlie Brown. Sometimes I wonder if we're all turning into a Charlie Brown. Because more and more, we are driven by fear.

If we were to go to Lucy for psychiatric advice, she'd probably tell us that a great many of us are suffering from hypochondria. The fear of getting sick. The constant, chronic anxiety that comes from always being afraid for your own health and the health of everyone you love. Of always wondering when COVID is going to get you. Panicking over every cough, every sneeze, every sore throat.

Of course, there are plenty of people here who are not like that. Who have no fear of COVID. No fear of getting sick. No worries about their health.

But I feel like a great many of those people have replaced their hypochondria with a different fear. Lucy would probably call it "iatrophobia." The rest of us call it "fear of doctors."

Because it seems like if you're not afraid of COVID, then you are afraid of the medical establishment. Deeply suspicious of anything they say. Convinced that things like vaccines and masks are potentially dangerous to your health. Worried about who you can and can't trust.

The truth is, we have a lot of fear in this country. And that doesn't even include all the other fears that surround us. The fear of inflation. The fear of supply chain disruptions. The fear of China. The fear of mass shootings. The fear of restrictions on our freedoms. The fear of cultural shifts that boggle our minds. There is so much fear. Lucy would make so many nickels, nickels, nickels in our country today.

And yet, fear is also nothing new. It's a basic human emotion, experienced through the history of the world. And I'm sure it was something that Mary and Joseph and the shepherds from our Gospel lesson experienced on a regular basis as well.

Our Christmas reading begins with a reason for fear, after all. *"In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered."* There's three reasons for fear in that one sentence.

First, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus. The Roman Emperor. The Roman Emperor who has subjugated Judea and Galilee under Roman rule. Mary and Joseph live amongst a conquered people. And their overlords are far from gentle in how they treat the Jewish people.

But then there's the decree itself. A decree that they should be registered. Caesar Augustus is taking a census of the Roman Empire. He's counting the number of people in each province and territory. Why is he counting them? So that he knows how much tax he can demand of them.

Mary and Joseph know that at the end of this registration they can look forward to even more of their meager income being taken by a corrupt government. They know it will be even harder to make ends meet. Even harder to feed and clothe this new baby that they're going to have. So they have that fear too.

And then there's the registration itself. A long, fairly dangerous journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem in the final days of Mary's pregnancy. That would be enough to make me sick with worry right there.

And this journey ends, of course, with them arriving not at the bedroom of a family member's house or a comfortable inn, but a barn. Surrounded by animals. Where Mary gives birth and lays her newborn in a feeding trough.

The shepherds outside of Bethlehem had their own fears as well. They were Jews, like Mary and Joseph. They had many of the same fears, I'm sure. Fear of the Romans. Fear of taxes.

But that particular night, they probably had a different set of fears. For they were keeping watch over their flocks by night. Shepherds generally didn't stay with their flocks all night long. They put them into a sheepfold, close the gate, and go to bed.

But these shepherds are keeping watch... all night. Which means there was a reason to keep watch. There were thieves on the loose, stealing sheep from other shepherds. There were wild animals prowling around. Lions or wolves or other predators, seeking a lamb to devour. There was something dangerous lurking about. And the shepherds were the flock's only defense.

And yet, what ends up sneaking up on them that night is not a thief or a lion or a wolf. It's an angel. A whole host of angels, eventually. Surrounded by the glory of the Lord. And the shepherds are terrified.

Why? Why are they terrified? Aren't angels beautiful? Aren't they a source of comfort? Don't we pray for angels to give us their protection? "Let your holy angel be with me that the evil foe may have no power over me." Luther wrote that in his evening prayer.

Seeing an angel should be comforting, but it's not. Because, as I said, these angels are surrounded by the glory of the Lord. And when you see the glory of the Lord, it changes you.

Because you realize that all the things you were afraid of don't matter. The fear of responsibility, cats, and staircases. The fear of Romans and taxes, thieves and lions. The fear of COVID. The fear of doctors. The fear of... everything.

None of it matters compared to the fear of the Lord. The fear of his wrath. The fear of his Law. To see the glory of the Lord is to see your own sinfulness in stark contrast to his holiness. It is to see what a poor, miserable sinner you really are. And how much you do not deserve his love and protection.

Go back through the Bible and you will see it time and time again. From Mary and Zechariah when the angels appeared to them. To Isaiah in the Temple. To Moses on Mount Sinai. All the way back to Adam and Eve hiding in the Garden of Eden.

What do they all have in common? In each case, they were confronted with the glory of the Lord and they were terrified. Because the power and holiness of the Lord is a terrifying thing for a sinner to behold.

So it's not surprising that the shepherds respond in this way. What is surprising, at least to them, is how the angel responds. "*Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy.*" Fear not. I'm not here to destroy you. Fear not. I am not a instrument of God's wrath for you sins. Fear not. I have good news.

And it is for you. And for all people. For all sinners who fear God's judgement. For to you is born this day a Savior who is Christ the Lord. And he doesn't come to you surrounded by the terrifying glory of the Lord. He doesn't come with fear and judgement.

He comes as a tiny newborn. Wrapped in cloths. Lying in a manger. He comes in the weakest, poorest, most fragile package you can possibly imagine. In the least fearful way that God could possible come to earth.

Because he's not here to make you afraid. He's here to take away your fear. He's here to take away your fear of tyrants and taxes. To take away your fear of thieves and monsters. To take away your fear of sickness and doctors.

Because he's here to bring you into God's kingdom. A kingdom that is not of this world. A kingdom without greed or hate. Without evil or pain. Without sickness or deceit. A kingdom without death.

*"God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."* He came to take all of our sin and condemnation, all our punishment, upon himself on the cross. And he destroy it. He took on our frail, fragile flesh. He took on our poor, miserable sins.

And he died. So that our sins might be nailed to his cross. He died and then rose again, so that he might proclaim victory over everything we fear. When you are in Christ, there is no reason to be afraid.

Fear not. We have good news of great joy. Fear not. We have a Savior. Christ the Lord. Fear not. For the glory of the Lord surrounds us. Not to condemn us for our sins, but to make us holy. Fear not. For God has made peace among those with whom he is pleased.

Fear not. For you are a lamb in the Good Shepherd's flock. Just like the sheep the shepherds watched over outside of Bethlehem. Those sheep rested without fear that evening because they had a shepherd to keep them safe. You can rest without fear this Christmas Eve because you have a shepherd keeping you safe. And he has sent his holy angel, he has sent his holy Son, that the evil foe may have no power over you. Amen.