

“DO NOT BE AFRAID FOR UNTO YOU IS BORN A SAVIOR!”

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Elkton United Methodist Church
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Christmas Eve

John 1:1-14

Luke 2:1-20

As most of you know, I grew up here in Elkton. Actually, I was born in New York but we came to Elkton when I was in the second grade, so I spent the majority of my growing up years here in Elkton. Our extended family, however – my mother’s and father’s families lived away from here – my mother’s family in Ithaca, New York and my father’s in Northern New Jersey, not far from New York City. So when we wanted to visit family, our family of eight – Mom, Dad and the six of us kids – would pile in our station wagon and hit the road.

I think – probably to keep themselves from going stark-raving mad – my parents had us play games as we rode along – games like the license plate game, where you’d try to find license plates from far-off states, or “I Spy,” or – these you’re going to love – who could see “Grandma’s Junk Yard” first – that was a junk yard we’d pass on the way to Ithaca, or who could spot Cayuga Lake first as we’d drive over the hill near Ithaca College and down into town.

And, of course, there were always songs to be sung, like the family classic we sang while driving at night, “I See the Moon,” and “Over the River and Through the Woods to Grandmother’s House We Go.”

Actually, that song popped up this week while I was doing background work for this sermon. I saw an old cartoon I had in one of my files which was drawn by a man named Tom Wilson. In it you see a carload of people traveling along a snowy highway. The kids look and act like the Bunnells – yelling and screaming; the parents look harried and ready to pull their hair out. In the next frame, one of the parents says, “Let’s sing,” and so they start, “Over the river and through the woods to grandmother’s house we go . . .” and in the last frame, you see the car pulling into a driveway, and peeking out a window the faces of an elderly couple, and the woman turns to the man and says, “We moved over the river and through the woods, and they still found us!” (Gerald Fuller, *Stories for All Seasons*, p. 50)

Now, I’m sure none of you are feeling that way. You’re loving having your family with you, but I’m guessing that there’s a fair amount of stress carried into this room tonight. If you’re anything like me, your life for the past few weeks has been a string of endless “to do” lists – gifts to buy, cards to write and send, houses to

decorate, meals to plan – and all of that, of course, is on top of the “normal” things of life. It’s crazy!

I’ll bet some of you still have things to do when you go home from here tonight – putting toys together, finding places for everyone to sleep, making sure everything’s lined up for tomorrow.

Then put on top of all that the stress of everyday life in our world right now. Never very far from our minds – fires burning out of control on the West Coast, families shattered by addiction across the country, war and terrorism around the globe, mean-spiritedness and cynicism everywhere. It’s a tough time right now, and we’re all feeling it. It’s enough, well, to make you lose faith sometimes.

But no matter where you are right now, on this Eve of Christmas, I have four words for you – “Do Not Be Afraid.” Because of what we celebrate this night – the birth of the Savior of the World. Writer David Lose puts it so beautifully: “When God surveyed humanity and realized how dark and difficult our days could be, how confused we get about our identity and place, how many painful things we do to each other out of that confusion and insecurity, God decided to do something about it. And so, after giving the law and sending the prophets, God got involved. Personally, intimately involved with God’s fallen creation. But note (he continues): when God decided to get personally involved, God didn’t come to punish, or frighten, or scold, or threaten, or any of the other things that are often attributed to God. Instead, God came to tell us that we are loved, deeply, truly and forever.” (On-line, “Keep It Simple,” David Lose)

Friends, you are loved – deeply, truly and forever by God himself. So deeply and so truly that He sent his only begotten Son that you might have life and have it in abundance. Listen again to the words of scripture – “For unto you is born this day a Savior” - unto you.

And as David Lose said, “God didn’t come to punish or frighten or scold or threaten us,” God in Christ came to love us. In him, and through him, God gave us so much, so tonight, let me remind you of some of the reasons, because of Jesus, you have no need to fear.

First, because you are loved beyond measure. God sent his Son to show you how precious you are to him – so precious he gave you his greatest gift. You know, friends, our world today does not do a very good job of telling us how precious we are. Rather, it tells us regularly how we don’t measure up, how we’re not good enough, how someone else is better than us, how we have to claw our way to the top, and be better than everyone else. It is a dog-eat-dog world and it’s easy to get down on yourself. How easily those things make an impact on us and cause us to doubt ourselves.

Don't let them, because you are special, you are precious, you are beloved – so much that God sent a Savior to you and for you!

You know those wonderful film clips you see on TV and social media all the time of soldiers returning from deployment and surprising their families? Everyone of them is a tear jerker, because the parent runs towards the children with arms wide open ready to embrace them in a big bear hug and the family runs toward the parents, usually with tears running down their faces, ever so grateful to be with this one they love who loves them oh, so much.

Picture that in your mind, but instead, just this time, make it you and Jesus. Picture Jesus as that parent, with his arms wide open, running to embrace you and love you, and then see yourself, as that child running into his loving arms, being welcomed and loved as no one else can, being reminded of just how precious you are.

Do not be afraid, my friends, because no matter what the world tries to tell you, no matter how it tries to knock you down, Jesus has come to remind you of how precious you are, how loved you are.

He has also come to reassure you and bring you peace. It is a scary world at times and it surely rattles us. But it's not only the world that rattles us, we do it to ourselves, because we know who we really are, and how we fall short of being who we are called to be. We know that we are sinners standing in the need of grace. We know, deep down in our hearts, that we do things we ought not do, and don't do things we should be doing. And we beat ourselves up for that.

Jesus comes to set us free. He comes to remind us that he has paid the price for our sin, and we have no need to fear.

I read a story this week told by Max Lucado about a man named Bill Tucker. When Bill was about 16 years old, his father had a health crisis and had to sell the family business. Even after his father regained his health, the family struggled mightily financially.

Mr. Tucker was an entrepreneur, so he came up with an idea. He won the bid to reupholster the chairs at the local movie theater. The idea stunned his family because he had never stitched a seat and didn't even own a sewing apparatus. Nevertheless, he found someone to teach him how to do it, and then located an industrial strength sewing machine. The family scraped together every cent they had to buy it.

So one fine day, Bill and his dad rode to get the equipment. They were both in great spirits anticipating a brighter future. They loaded the equipment on their

truck and secured it right behind the cab. Then Mr. Tucker invited Bill to drive them home.

Then, listen to what happened in Bill's own words: "As we were driving along, we were excited, and I, like any sixteen year old driver, was probably not paying enough attention to my speed. Just as we were turning on the cloverleaf to get on the expressway, I will never, ever forget watching that sewing machine, which was already top-heavy, begin to tip. I slammed on the brakes, but it was too late. I saw it go over the side. I jumped out and ran around the back of the truck. As I rounded the corner, I saw our hope and our dream lying on its side in pieces. And then I saw my dad just looking. All of his risk and all of his endeavor and all of his struggling and all of his dream, all of his hope to take care of his family was lying there, shattered."

"You know what comes next, don't you? 'Stupid, punk kid driving too fast, not paying attention, ruined the family by taking away our livelihood.' But that's not what he said. He looked right at me, 'Oh Bill, I am so sorry.' And he walked over, put his arms around me, and said, 'Son, this is going to be okay.'" (Max Lucado, *3:16, The Numbers of Hope*, p. 31)

My friends, God whispered the same thing to you in his gift of Jesus. It's going to be okay. No matter what you've done in your life, or what has been done to you, or what you're facing, it's going to be okay. Do not be afraid.

So first, do not be afraid because God's gift of Christ comes to show you that you are deeply loved and precious; secondly, that no matter what you're facing, with Christ, it will be okay, and then finally, because with Christ, you are never and will never be alone – ever.

Let me show you by way of a final story - a story I have known for years and years and never forgotten - a story about a man named Henry Carter, who was a pastor, but also served as the administrator of a home for emotionally disturbed children. On Christmas Eve night, he was making last minute preparations for the worship service, when one of the floor mothers came to tell him that young Timmy had crawled under his bed and refused to come out. They had tried everything and he wouldn't come out from under his bed. "Please, Pastor Carter, won't you see what you can do?" So Pastor Carter, even though he was under the gun to get things ready for worship, went over to the dormitory to see young Timmy.

He followed the woman to the room, and she pointed out Timmy's bed, and of course, there was no sign of him, for he was tucked all the way under it. So Henry just went over and started talking to the woman standing next to him. He talked about the beautiful Christmas tree with all its colorful lights, and all of the

beautiful packages for the kids stacked high around it, mentioning, of course, that there were packages for somebody named Timmy.

Nothing. No movement came from under the bed. Apparently, that tack wasn't working.

So Pastor Carter switched gears. He got down on his hands and knees and lifted up the edge of the bedspread. All of a sudden two enormous blue eyes were looking out at him. And, of course, Henry could have just pulled him out and given him a good talking-to, but he didn't. Instead, he began to tell him about the delicious meal they were going to be having for dinner. He described it all in luscious detail, and he also threw in the fact that he had already spied a stocking hanging from the chimney with Timmy's name on it.

Still nothing. It wasn't working.

So, do you know what Pastor Carter did? He got down on his stomach and crawled under the bed next to Timmy. It was a tight fit, but he squeezed in there and began to talk quietly to the boy, telling him about the songs they were going to sing, and how wonderful the service would be. Finally, he ran out of things to say, and just laid there quietly.

After a little while, he felt Timmy's little hand reach over to grasp his hand. When he did, Pastor Carter said, 'You know what, Timmy? It's kind of close quarters down here, let's you and me go out where we can stand up.' And that's exactly what they did – and hand in hand, they went off to the chapel to sing the songs of Christmas together.

Thinking back on it later, Henry realized that what he had done was a reflection of exactly what God did for us in Jesus Christ. God pleaded with us to enjoy all the good things he had created, and we wouldn't listen. So God drew closer. He spoke to us through the prophets and lawgivers, and still we wouldn't listen. Then God stooped to earth, and came to dwell with us in our loneliness and alienation. And it was then, finally, that we took his hand, and knew life the way God intended it to be for us.

And I would add, it was then that we were reminded, once and for all, that we have no need to fear, for Christ is with us, ever and always, walking with us every step of our life's journey.

So, my friends, no matter what you're going through right now, remember this: Do Not Be Afraid. For unto you is born a Savior, who calls you precious and beloved, who forgives you and sets you free, and walks with you every step of the

way. That, my friends is the Good News of the Gospel. That is the Good News of Christmas. Thanks be to God!

Amen.