

December 24, 2017 – Annunciation Episcopal Church – Christmas Eve

Rev. Elizabeth Molitors

*But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid."  
Luke 2:10a*

The British television series, *Call the Midwife*, offers a window into life in an impoverished neighborhood of London in the mid-to-late 1950s. The stories told are from the vantage point of a group of nurse midwives – Anglican nuns and lay women – who live and serve in the area, and are drawn from the real-life memoirs of one of the midwives.

In one story, a newborn baby is left, out in the bitter cold, on the steps of the convent where the midwives live; though no one knows it yet, the abandoned baby is the child of a teenage girl who kept her pregnancy a secret from her parents and everyone else, and who delivered the baby on her own. She's a “good girl” from a “good family” - she's quiet and responsible, does her chores, takes care of her little siblings; she's about to graduate from school and get her first job. Her father is a church warden and her mother is spoken of as a “pillar of the community.” She's ashamed of the pregnancy, and terrified that if the truth gets out, her life and the lives of her family will be ruined. And so she does the only thing she can think of, and leaves the baby where she hopes it will be cared for.

When the baby is discovered and rescued, one of the young midwives wonders aloud to a more senior colleague, with judgment and incredulity in her voice, “Why would anyone do such a thing?” Sister Julienne, the wise and experienced leader of the convent, replies, “I have come to the conclusion that there are only two reasons for ever doing anything. One is love, the other is fear.”

Fear drove the young girl to hide. Fear cut her off from seeking help. Fear was the persistent voice in her head telling her she had to go it alone, even if that meant putting her life at risk. Fear certainly seemed to have the upper hand in this girl's life.

And yet.

Driven by love, she found a place of safety for her baby. Later, when she suffers life-threatening complications as a result of giving birth on her own, the young girl finally finds the courage to trust, and tells one of the midwives her secret, so she can get the medical care she needs. Trust and courage are manifestations of love, too.

Fear and love: the only two reasons for doing anything. This is the wisdom of the angels.

When the angel Gabriel comes to Mary to ask her to be the mother of Jesus, the conversation begins, “Fear not.”

When the angel comes to Joseph to tell him that it's okay for him to take Mary as his wife, that conversation, also, begins with, “Fear not.”

And when the angels visit the shepherds in the fields, to share the news that the Savior has been born, they start their message with, “Fear not.”

Because God, who sent the angels, knows us and our weaknesses all too well. God knows the seductive lure of fear, which tries to tell us that it's protecting us, taking care of us, but which is, in fact, robbing us blind. Short of the fear that keeps us from crossing the street without looking both ways or poking at a hungry bear, fear is a thief, an aggressive bully that that steals our ability to see and receive the gifts that come from love. Gifts like grace and mercy, acceptance and courage; joy. Gifts like generosity and awe. Love allows us to see others, connect with them, make room for them. Love makes possible forgiveness and benefit of the doubt. Love is persistent and patient, and while it may look on the surface like a weakness that will crumble under the least bit of pressure, in fact, love is the only lasting thing.

If she'd given in to her fear, Mary never would have said “yes” to the monumental task of being the God-bearer. A job rife with uncertainty, risks, unknowns. Giving in to fear, at that moment, might have seemed like the most wise, sane, safe thing ever. Thank God Mary pushed away the thief that is fear, and took the chance to give in to love, instead.

If Joseph had given in to his fear, Mary would have been out as his fiancée; and what other man would want to take her on as his wife, pregnant with someone else's child? If Joseph had succumbed to fear, he would have lost the chance to be a partner with Mary, to raise Jesus, to teach him the carpentry trade, to guide his education in the Jewish faith and scriptures. And though few, if any, would have judged him for indulging his fear, thank God he saw through it, and took the chance to give in to love, instead.

And the shepherds....we don't know what difference it made in their lives to respond to the invitation of the angels to work through their terror and be the first to see the newborn Christ child. But if they'd stayed stuck in their fear, they would have missed out on something glorious.

St. Paul said, perfect love casts out fear. That's the miracle of the incarnation that we celebrate here this evening. The perfect love of God coming to us in the form of a child – innocent and helpless and vulnerable – to show us what love looks like: trust and open-ness. Sometimes unexpected. Not always predictable. Love is sometimes inconvenient and uncomfortable, sometimes undignified: the Savior of the world, born to an obscure young woman in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by animal bodies doing animal things, laying in a feed trough, being visited by rough-and-tumble shepherds. *But* because Jesus came in love, because he came *from* love, fear had no place, found no toe-hold in that make-shift delivery room.

In the coming weeks, we'll hear the story of Herod, who sends the three magi off in search of the newborn Christ child – ostensibly to pay him homage, but in reality, to destroy him. Herod, who is by contrast to Mary and Joseph and the shepherds, the perfect incarnation of fear. Suspicious and jealous, insecure and insincere. A man with all the trappings of wealth and temporal power, who yet sees the world only in terms of scarcity. While Herod appears to have it all, the thief that is fear crowds out everything of lasting value, leaving him with nothing.

What would *our* lives look like if we took the angels at their word, and feared not? What would it be like to push away the untrustworthy gifts that fear brings with it –

anxiety and jealousy, insecurity and greed, addiction and suspicion – and instead embrace the gifts of love? What would it be like to bring the message of the Christmas story with us beyond the Christmas season, and tell the world – in our words and in our very being – that we choose to be unafraid, because the God that is perfect love is with us.

There are – this night and always – only two reasons to do anything: love and fear. May we heed the call of the angels, and the invitation of God, and ground all of our reasons in love. *Amen.*