

# *The Sunnybrook Pulpit*

*Rev. Ross Smillie*

December 24, 2016 – Christmas Eve 8pm

## **Don't be Afraid!**

But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid..." – Luke 2:1-20

During this message, we will sing together two or three times, a piece of music based on the message the angel brought to the shepherds, "Don't be afraid." Just so the tune gets in your heads, we'll sing it twice, and then so it gets into your hearts, we'll sing it once more, three times in total. (*More Voices # 90*)

Don't be afraid.

My love is stronger, my love is stronger than your fear.

Don't be afraid.

My love is stronger,

and I have promised, promised to be always near.

Being a shepherd sounds like a hard job. And of all the parts of a shepherd's job, I think keeping watch sounds like the worst job of all. Can you imagine it? The sheep and goats herded for safety inside a stone corral, the shepherds camped at the entrance, perhaps one tending a small fire while the others tried to sleep, shifting uncomfortably on the rocky ground. I like to camp, but I feel the rocks even through my camping mattress, and I never sleep very well when I'm not in my own bed. I'm sure my camping equipment would seem luxurious to those shepherds.

And perhaps there were other reasons for them not to sleep well. They were after all, keeping watch. Against what? There are lions in that country, hungry lions, for whom a plump sheep would make easy prey, a nice light snack. Would you want to get between a lion and its appetizer? Would you like to be the main course?

There were bandits too, in that country, bands of desperate men who had borrowed money and had to flee from the loan sharks. The bandits lived in the hills east of Bethlehem, always hungry, always on the watch for some way to make a meal. They would happily carry off a lamb or kid. And if they

were hungry enough, perhaps they would not hesitate to knock a shepherd on the head to keep him from interfering.

Even aside from bandits and wild animals, there were lots of reasons for the shepherds to be nervous. For they too had reasons to worry about where their next meal might come from. They had no money saved up for a rainy day. Everything was invested in the flock. If you are a shepherd with only a few sheep, you hope for good healthy lambs in the spring, but what if one of your ewes develops milk fever or mastitis? The loss of even one lamb can set a shepherd back. The loss of a ewe would be a real hardship. An infectious disease spread through the whole flock would be devastating.

And then there is the family. Are the kids safe and healthy at home without you? Is the wife lonely? Might someone be taking advantage of her in your absence?

There are lots of things for a shepherd to worry about, lots of reasons to shift uncomfortably on the cold, stony ground.

And so, that night, when the angel paid its visit, maybe the shepherds really needed to hear that message, “Be not afraid. Do not be afraid. I bring good news, good news of great joy, good news for all people.” Not good news for some and bad news for the rest, the way it usually works, but good news for all, for everyone.

Let’s sing “Don’t be afraid,” and as we sing it, let’s imagine those worried shepherds can hear us sing. Let’s sing it for them.

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It isn’t just shepherds who have worries in the small hours of the night. Even if you have only yourself to worry about, there always seem to be things to trouble your mind.

And if you are keeping watch over someone or something else, well the worries can multiply very rapidly. If you have a gerbil or a fish, a puppy or a kitten, a brother or a sister, a mom or a dad or a friend whom you care about, sometimes you worry. If you have a family or a business or a congregation for whom you are the shepherd, there can be many sleepless nights. We

worry because we care, so it isn't a bad thing to worry. Worry is a sign that we love someone or something.

We may not worry about lions, but many of us do worry about bills and making the payments.

We may not worry about starving to death, but many of us do worry about what we will put on the table.

We may not worry about bandits, but some of us do worry about crime and drugs and gangs and terrorists.

We may not worry about milk fever and mastitis, although some of us do, but there are enough illnesses threatening those we love, to keep us awake sometimes.

We may not worry about our spouses straying, although some of us do, but there are enough struggles in families that most of us can think of something that could go wrong.

And besides those, there are things that never even occurred to those shepherds of old, worries about climate change and rogue states and trade barriers and recessions and bankruptcy and many more besides.

There are lots of reasons to worry, lots of things that trouble *our* dreams, and keep our anxious minds from relaxing into sleep. So maybe tonight we too need to hear the message of the angel song to not be afraid. So let's sing it again, and sing it this time for the people you care about, your friends and family, some of whom might be sitting close to you right now. Sing it for them: "Don't be afraid!" (twice this time)

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I used to have a poster that said, "Who said worrying never does me any good? The things I worry about never happen." I thought it was funny, because most of the time the things we worry about don't happen. But eventually I took the poster down, because sometimes the things we worry about do happen, and then it doesn't seem so funny. Life is hard sometimes. Life isn't fair sometimes. Life is cruel sometimes.

But even when life is harsh and cruel, we need not be afraid. Even if our worst fears come to pass, we need not be afraid, because of the good news of great joy which the angel sang to the shepherds. We need not be afraid because the love of God is strong, not only stronger than our fear, but stronger than anything we can fear. I'm not saying we will never suffer – that

would be naive. We are mortal, and mortal life involves suffering. It is unavoidable. The issue is not whether we will suffer, but how we will meet that suffering. Will we meet it with courage and faith, or with fear and trembling? Will we meet it with gratitude for the blessings of life, or with bitterness and anger? Will we meet it with hope, or with despair?

The story goes that when the Saviour came, he was not born in a royal palace, but in a stable. He was not laid on a feather pillow and covered with silk sheets, but laid in a feeding trough and diapered with strips of cloth. He was not born to privilege, but to poverty. From the very beginning, the Messiah and Lord experienced the worst of our fears. He himself said later that he had nowhere to lay his head. And at the very end, he suffered the worst kind of death, betrayed by a colleague, denied by a friend, abandoned by those who had pledged to follow him, condemned and brutally whipped and tortured to death on a cross – it doesn't get any worse than that. It was beyond Mary's worst nightmare – and yet it was not in vain. It was horrible beyond imagining, but now we call it Good Friday. Because in this life and death, the love at the heart of the universe took all our suffering on himself, enduring our deepest fears and most profound worries. And then, on the other side of Good Friday Jesus emerged from the tomb, transformed, raised from death, saying, you guessed it, "Don't be afraid." He showed them the scars in his hands and feet and ate a piece of fish, and unleashed a movement that is still changing the world, one heart at a time.

So don't be afraid. Don't be afraid of anything. There is nothing Christ has not met before you, and nothing over which he has not triumphed. And nothing, neither death nor life, nothing in the heavens above nor on the earth below, nothing today and nothing in the future, nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39) In that love, we can meet any challenge, overcome any fear, persevere even through the most anxious of times.

So let's sing one last time, "Don't be afraid," and this time sing it for yourself, let it soak into your heart and soul, and stay there, until there comes an anxious moment when you need to remember for yourself the good news of the angel, the good news of great joy, that God is always, always with us. (twice through)

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