

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
305 EAST MAIN STREET
DURHAM, NC 27701
PHONE: (919) 682-5511



“All”

A meditation by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

Christmas Eve (Year C)

December 24, 2015

Isaiah 9:2–7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11–14; Luke 2: 1–20

And they feared a great fear. that’s what the Greek translation says
of the shepherds when the glaring glory of the angel blinds them in the
darkness of night: *they feared a great fear.* Who wouldn’t?
Or maybe “they” also includes Joseph and Mary,
who were ordered to travel in her third trimester of pregnancy
only to find that when the time came for her to deliver,
stable accommodations were their only option.
Most likely, they also *feared a great fear* for the health of their newborn.
Fear is a natural human reaction to things that startle us in the darkness,
especially things like angels, blinding glory, or labor and delivery.

Things seem to be surprising us in the darkness of *these days*, too.
Bedraggled migrants are streaming beyond borders, fleeing the violence
of their homelands, and begging the mere mercy
of stable accommodations for their families in distress.
It is interesting that Syria is mentioned in our holy story, too, isn’t it,
which makes you wonder is if both stories aren’t holy?

And our initial reaction is to *fear a great fear*
and keep a great distance from the other, who once upon a time was us

if we remember back beyond our convenient amnesia.
Militant jihadists are invading the minds of impressionable young people
and coercing them into acts of destruction and terrorism both here and abroad.
And our gut level reaction is to *fear a great fear* for ourselves and for our children,
and we construct great firewalls and plot great carpets of revenge.
Closer to home, some public servants in uniform are pulling over innocent people,
shooting first and asking questions later, if at all.
And innocent people are protesting and calling out the injustice,
and we recoil at both the cruel actions and the raging reactions,
and we *fear a great fear* and hide behind our greater weaponry.
I am no different: I feel pretty phobic about these issues, too!
Fear is the basest of human instincts: it is so base
that originates in the reptilian part of our brain, the amygdala.
It is playing to the snake that once lost paradise for all of humanity.
Fear itself is the only thing we have to fear, Franklin D. Roosevelt reminded
us from the darkness of Great Depression, when our nation
once stood on the cusp of world war.

"Fear not," the angel says to the trembling shepherds,
"I bring you good tidings of great joy that will be for *all people*.
For this day, in the most insignificant of places, a Savior has been born.
You may either cave to your fear and retreat, or you may lean into the darkness
and go forward to find the source of your full humanity,
humbly lying in a grotto manger."

The word *fear* IS prominent in our readings for this birth day: it is alluded to
three times in Luke's birth narrative.
However, the overriding concept is not fear itself, but rather the concept of *all*:
the Savior, the Redeemer, the swaddled little Holy One
comes to all the world, for all people that on earth do dwell,

to all the world which God so loves.

Good tidings of great joy come to *all people*; peace on earth and goodwill is intended *for all* on whom God's favor rests.

Jesus, the Christ, the Newborn King will be our second Adam:

the one who will raise us above our basest fearful nature,
the one who will fill-full our humanity with costly compassion and mercy,
making us fully human in his image
if we allow our trembling hearts to be so filled.

A visiting organist to our church, Tom Warburton, was sitting in the foyer a few Sundays ago, watching the people stream into this sanctuary for our annual Lessons and Carols service.

"I have to tell you, it was a beautiful thing to see," he told me later that day.

"The doors were wide open because of the unusually warm weather,
and some of them were little people, and some were quite tall;
some of them were people of darker hue, and some of them quite pale;
some of them were from very traditional families,
and some of them families of a mixed adoptive nature;
some of them came with same-sex partners, some of them as singles,
some came supporting older adults on their arm, some carrying babies,
some sporting facial hair, some no hair at all, one had purple hair,
some wandered in off the streets or from the homeless shelter next door.

It was a beautiful thing to see," he said. "I just wanted to share that with you.

The door was open, and *all the people* streamed in."

I'm paraphrasing Tom's exact words because early on,
he started slipping into angel speak to my ears.

He was to me as the angel to the shepherds that Christmas night:

they both were messengers of the good news of this supernatural thing
that is happening, that God is birthing right here in our midst.

His epiphany was an epiphany of God's gift to all for this day.

"A heavenly way of life has been implanted on the earth,

angels communicate with mortals without fear...

and on every side all things co-mingle," said St. John Chrysostom

in the fourth century.

And we have a choice, as I see it:

we can either fear a great fear, spotlight the other,

throw up great firewalls, hide behind great weaponry, seek and destroy.

Or we can embrace this counterintuitive, holy mystery with even greater joy,

throw open our doors, marvel at the generosity of God,

and hurry off towards the dark unknown to see this beautiful

thing that has come to pass to and for *all people*.

Jesus, the Christ, is born. God's messengers then and now herald him.

Shepherds of the flock lead us through the dark unknown towards him.

All people are God's intended recipients of peace and good will.

Paradise lost is found once more in this humble Christ child.

Come, we meet him here, in bread and cup.

All who walk in darkness, all who fear their own fear, all are invited to come,

seeking God's Greater Light, Jesus, the Christ. Come!