

“Do Not Be Afraid”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
Christmas Eve – December 24, 2013

**Luke 2: 1-20**

**Isaiah 9: 2-7**

As human beings, we do not normally seek out storms. The only people I know who tend to wish for and go toward storms are weather forecasters. And of course, we are left to question their sanity as they are chasing tornadoes or being buffeted by hurricane-force winds, while telling us we should be taking shelter. A classic case of “Do as I say, not as I do.”

Storms disrupt lives. Consider the storms we have witnessed in both our state and our world this year. The tornadoes which struck last month caused incredible destruction in many places, including Kokomo, Lebanon, and Washington, Illinois. The strongest typhoon to ever be recorded making landfall killed over 6000 people in the Philippines. One of the strongest tornadoes in history struck Moore, Oklahoma, in May, killing 24 people, and followed a track eerily similar to a strong tornado which struck the same city 14 years earlier.

And then there were the flooding rains we experienced this past weekend here in Central Indiana. Over five inches fell in places south of Indianapolis, not including the melting snow that added to the inundation. Sue Hartman had the harrowing experience of driving back home Friday night in the midst of heavy rain and fog, only to find the entrance to her neighborhood was blocked by fire trucks and news vans. Upon further investigation, she discovered that most of the homes around hers had water either in or nearly in their houses, and people had been evacuated. Sue was fortunate that her home was not affected, but hers is a personal example of the level of disruption and impact such a storm can have in our community. Whether it is rain or wind or snow or ice, the storms of nature can cause chaos, pain, injury, and even death.

Storms are not limited to mother nature, however. Storms come in many other forms. The stress of our job can feel like a storm right about now: meeting end-of-the-year deadlines, being on-call for emergencies, determining how we will provide for ourselves and our families in leaner economic times. In the same manner that a small boat is tossed and turned in a storm, we can feel that we have lost control of our direction, and are stretched way too thin for our own good.

The storm of grief can be overwhelming, to be sure. Battling through grief and loss at the holidays seems like a storm: as we face another day without our loved one, it feels like trudging through a blizzard – cold, bleak, and endless. Our congregation has experienced eleven deaths this year; eleven. That equals the most deaths in one year this congregation has experienced in its 51 years of existence. And that does not include the many deaths members or friends of our congregation have experienced in their families. There is no question that death and mourning our loved ones has battered and wearied us like a storm.

But grief is more than just death – it is about loss. We feel lost in the storm when broken relationships cause pain and anger. We feel lost in the storm when loved ones make poor choices that break trust and integrity. We feel lost in the storm when we are laid off after years of faithful, dedicated service at our work place. We feel lost in the storm when we cannot physically do all that we used to do, and are unsure of what the future holds.

Storms – whether they are in nature or in our lives – cause anxiety and chaos. Storms can cause us to doubt. Storms can cause fear and trembling.

“Do not be afraid.” When Joseph finds out that his fiancé is pregnant, and he is not the father of the baby, he must feel like he’s in the midst of a storm of anxiety and worry. He chooses to “dismiss her quietly,” according to Matthew, so that she will not be subject to public disgrace, but also, undoubtedly, because he was fearful of what people would say. And the first words he hears in a dream from God’s messenger are, “Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife” (Matthew 1:20). A calm comes amid the storm.

“Do not be afraid.” Outside the town of Bethlehem, where the rural, poor, lowly shepherds lived with their flocks of sheep, a sudden light and appearance in the sky terrifies them. And the first words used by God’s messengers to announce the Messiah’s arrival are, “Do not be afraid – for see I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people” (Luke 2:10). A calm comes amid the storm.

In many respects, the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem on this holy night was, as Edmund Steimle puts it, “the eye of the storm.” Prior to his birth, there was the flood; the anger of God at the golden calf; the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of Israel into Babylon; the struggle of Jonah and God and the great fish; and the eventual dominance of the Roman Empire over Israel. After his birth, Herod had innocent 2-year-old boys killed to try and murder the infant Jesus; once he was an adult plots were made to kill him; he was betrayed by his own disciple; and on Good Friday that same child was killed.

This night in Bethlehem was more than just a peaceful night. It was a time in which God brought real peace, real calm, real tranquility. Jesus did not come into the world so that the past and future would be forgotten. Instead, God sent him into the world so that we might find our peace in the eye of the storm while the storm is whirling around us. God brought us “a peace that passes all understanding because it is not a peace apart from conflict, pain, suffering, violence, and confusion; that’s the kind of peace we can understand all too well. But it’s a peace like the peace in the eye of a hurricane, a peace smack in the middle of it all, a peace that indeed passes all understanding” (Steimle, “Eye of the Storm,” A Chorus of Witnesses, 241-242).

While storms can cause us to be afraid, they can also force us to stop, pause, and reset our perspective on the world. In 1996, when Debbie and I were in seminary, we lived through a blizzard in Princeton, New Jersey. Overnight, the weather changed from sunny and mild to cold and snowy. When we woke up the next morning, we were in the middle of a full-blown nor’easter. The wind was blowing, and the snow was coming down at the rate sometimes of three-inches per hour. By the next morning, 30 inches of snow lay on the ground, and a state of emergency had been declared by the governor.

I will always remember the day after that blizzard. I walked out of my dorm and there was no one around. No cars on the roads, no people walking or bicycling on the paths, no animals scampering or flying about. Princeton, New Jersey, was perfectly still and empty. The state of emergency did not allow anyone to be on the roadways, and for the better part of 36 hours it remained in place. But what it felt like was truly amazing. Here is one of the busiest places I have ever known – completely quiet and still. For all of us who were stressfully preparing for exams, we found a stillness which we couldn’t find elsewhere. After that storm, there was indeed calm.

The world is full of storms, and yet God offers a peaceful calm tonight, saying, “Do not be afraid.” Amid all the natural disasters which have occurred, I am struck by the outpouring of generosity and compassion which pours forth. Strangers helping

strangers; neighbors offering shelter and food; people donating time, money, and resources – they are all evidence of God’s people not living in fear, but living in faith.

Amid the storms of anxiety and stress, God often breaks in and forces us to stop, reassess, and choose anew what direction God is leading us in. There are many stresses of work and family and life which can weigh us down. But as people of faith, we are given the courage to look at our life through fresh lenses, and trust in the light which leads us out of darkness into God’s glory. Tonight, this holiest of nights, God is offering a peaceful calm, saying, “Do not be afraid.”

Amid the storms of grief and loss, God comforts and reassures us that we will never – we will never – be alone. It is hard to not have our parent, our child, our sibling, our grandparent, our friend, our family member with us this year. But as people of faith, we are given a hope that even in our despair and “lands of deep darkness – on us light has shined” (Isaiah 9:2). The light which has come into the world this night will never – will never – be overcome by the darkness. Tonight, this holiest of nights, God is offering a peaceful calm, saying, “Do not be afraid.”

Throughout the month of December in the Adult Forum Church School Class, we have discussed how the familiar carols we sing at Christmas are not just songs to make us feel happy and merry and “in the Christmas Spirit.” They are hymns of faith which tell the story of our faith. They are texts which richly speak of God’s choice to meet us tonight in human form, and lead us out of the storms of life. They are the church’s treatises of why this night is so important, and how the church feels moved to speak that faith in particular ways at particular moments in history.

Gary Shaw shared with us the backstory of one such carol. Rev. Phillips Brooks was a preacher at Holy Trinity Church in Philadelphia during the Civil War. He had ministered to the widows and orphans and families of his church during this great conflict, and he was exhausted spiritually and emotionally. Then, President Lincoln was assassinated on April 14, 1865, and Rev. Brooks was one of the preachers who led the president’s funeral. In 1866, he took a sabbatical from his ministry, and went to a place that President Lincoln had yearned to visit himself: the Holy Land.

*On Christmas Eve, 1866, Brooks rode horseback from Jerusalem to the tiny village of Bethlehem. He walked through the shepherds’ fields and down the dusty lanes of the town. And he attended a Christmas Eve service. Every rock and reel captured his imagination. “It seemed as if I could hear voices I know well,” he wrote, “telling each other of the ‘Wonderful Night’ of the Savior’s birth” (<http://derrickjeter.com/2012/12/21/o-little-town-of-bethlehem/>).*

Two years later, Brooks wrote a children’s poem that spoke of his experience in Bethlehem on that Christmas Eve, and his organist at Holy Trinity set it to music. Out of the storm of violence and death and chaos, one man heard and felt and trusted in the calm of this night, and so he wrote:

“O little town of Bethlehem, How still we see thee lie! Above thy deep and dreamless sleep, the silent stars go by. Yet in thy dark streets shineth, the everlasting light. The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”

“O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray. Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today. We hear the Christmas angels, the great glad tidings tell. O come to us, abide with us, Our Lord Emmanuel.”

May it be so, now and forevermore. Amen.