

“Do Not Be Afraid”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Christmas Eve – December 24, 2015

Luke 2: 1-20
Isaiah 9: 2-7

This has been an unusual start to winter in Central Indiana. Rather than cold temperatures and snowy sidewalks, we have been met with record highs and wet streets. Instead of snow shovels and parkas at the ready, it's been umbrellas and rain coats. I'm thinking at some point soon, all our ducks and geese might return to Lake John Knox outside my office.

While it's been nice on the heating bills to have milder temperatures, I've also noticed throughout December the persistent cloudy skies and morning fog. It seemed like we went for days upon days earlier this month without seeing the sun. And as for the fog, I remember seeing a picture posted on Facebook by someone on a morning flight into Indianapolis. The vantage point from the airplane showed nothing but a dense cloud deck over our city, with the tallest skyscraper – the Chase Tower – just poking its peak through the fog. It seemed like some mornings, between the darkness of the short winter days, and the low-lying fog, I wondered whether we would ever see the bright light of the sun.

Fog is very disconcerting. It envelopes you. It disorients you. It shields you from light and warmth. It prevents you from having a sense of connection to the sky above you. In very dense fog, it can even be hard to see the earth beneath your feet. It causes us to lose perspective and connection with those who are around us, whether they be far away, or right next to us. Fog can cause us to do things we might not normally do, because we are unable to see, feel, or think clearly in its midst.

For us and our world, this has felt like a year enveloped in a fog – a fog of fear. We have been disoriented by terrorist attacks that have been both random and calculated. This fog of fear has shielded us from a sense of security and safety. Our collective fear has prevented us, at times, from having a sense of connection with God in the heavens. When violence occurs in places far away, we have been unable to distinguish between those who are threatening and those who are innocent victims seeking safety. Paris, San Bernardino, Syria, Charleston, South Carolina, Chicago – these are just some of the places that have brought the fog of fear to our lives. For those of us in Indianapolis, whenever we hear the name “Amanda Blackburn,” we will

recall a senseless act of violence, and that fog of terror and fear descends all around us.

I felt it earlier this week. Debbie and Erin were out of town Sunday afternoon and Monday, and Heather was at home Monday during the day. I had a Session meeting Monday night, and I knew Debbie and Erin wouldn't be home until late. Before this year, I would not have been overly-concerned about Heather being at home on her own, especially now that she is older. But Monday - I felt that fog enveloping me. I texted her during the meeting, to make sure she was okay. As soon as we were done, I did what I normally do NOT do - I left right away to get home. The fog had prevented me from trusting, from seeing clearly, from letting go of my worry. The fog of fear can be very powerful and disconcerting, indeed.

What causes us to fear? A feeling that our safety is threatened. A realization that how we have always known life to be is about to change. A sense of dread that we are or will be alone. An anxiety that we may be losing control over how life has been, is, or should be going. As human beings, it seems we are experts at finding the fog of fear and allowing it to encompass us. We feel we need to protect ourselves from threats, from losing control, from "the other" - and we will act irrationally or faithlessly without hesitation.

The crazy thing about this human tendency of ours is that God does not wish for us to be fearful creatures. God created us to be in relationship - relationship with God, relationship with family, relationship with friends, relationship as the Body of Christ, the Church. These relationships were not meant to be fear-causing experiences. These relationships were intended to be fulfilling, nourishing, life-giving reminders of God's abiding presence with us at all times.

And yet, like a patient parent with a child who somehow just never gets it, God continues to reassure us, "Do not be afraid." In fact, God was doing that throughout this Season of Advent. Did you hear it? Could you hear it?

The prophet Zephaniah proclaimed: "Do not fear, O Zion . . . The Lord, your God, is in your midst" (3:16-17). The Apostle Paul exhorted: "The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer let your requests be made known to God" (4:5-6). The angel reassures Mary: "Do not be afraid, for you have found favor with God" (Luke 1:30). John the Baptist proclaimed: "Prepare the way of the Lord . . . all flesh shall see the salvation of God" (Luke 3:4-6). The prophet Malachi tells us: "See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me" (3:1).

And tonight, God reassures his people once again. The prophet Isaiah proclaimed that the fog and darkness of fear will not last forever. Instead, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness - on them light has shined"

(9:2). That light which was born to Mary and Joseph in a manger stall was not to be kept to themselves, but was to shine before others and all the world. When the angels appeared in the night sky over Bethlehem, the shepherds were terrified. "Do not be afraid," the angels said, "for see - I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people" (2:10).

The power of this night is that the darkness of fog and fear does not have the final word. The beauty of this night is that our God in the heavens made a choice to come down into this messy, fear-filled world, and reassure us that we are not alone. The joy of this night is that amid whatever fogs we find ourselves in - fear, hopelessness, grief, the pursuit of perfection, stress - whatever the fog, our God will not leave us there. Our God is Emmanuel - God With Us - and that is a light that penetrates the darkness so fiercely, the darkness shall not overcome it.

Yesterday, we had some pretty powerful storms, fairly unusual for December in Indiana. There was torrential rain, strong winds, even a tornado that touched down in Greenwood and damaged some structures. It was dark and gloomy for much of the day - certainly causing many of us fear and anxiety.

But as each day does, it came to an end. And today, the sun rose in the east. And the light of God shone through the darkness of yesterday's gloom, promising hope for a new day. The fear of yesterday was replaced with the expectant joy of today and tonight.

That's the thing about fog. It is not permanent. Even in the foggiest of places on earth, it will eventually give way to the sun. Fog burns away through the heat and light of the sun.

When the fog and darkness of fear and anxiety grip your world, know that the light of the world has come, and nothing shall overcome it. When the fog and darkness of hatred, discrimination, and isolation grip your world, remember that we who walked in darkness have seen a great light, and that on all of us has that light shined. When the fog and darkness of obstinance and gossip grip your world, believe that the light of the world will shatter the darkness, and is the "good news of great joy for all the people."

No matter how dark, no matter how fearful, our God shines his light this night, and every night, to dispel the myth of hopelessness, and renew his promise that he will never leave us alone. For tonight, this night, we know that "a child has been born for us, a son given to us" (Isaiah 9:6).

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." Thanks be to God. Amen.