

Merry Christmas everyone! It is truly a joy to be worshipping with you on this holy Christmas Eve, celebrating the birth of our Savior and Lord, the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ. Many of us are coming into this Christmas with a wide range of feelings, thoughts, concerns, hopes, and joys, and I want to assure you that every part of you is welcome here tonight. All the parts of your presence here today are more than welcome, and indeed God is with you in every time and space, feeling and state, no matter how fresh or familiar, fun or fearful.

The Christmas story we know and love so well joins us in this wide range of reactions and feelings.

The Christmas story is, of course, about celebrating the great joy of Jesus' birth, and the bold, confident "yes" Mary gives to God to mother the Son of God. It is also about the wholeness of being human. In these past two years, we've had to embrace our humanity in new and sometimes overwhelming ways - our fragility and fear, our strength and solitude, our needs and neighborly love. So too are the fragile parts of being human celebrated for the power they inherently carry in this Christmas story. Though sometimes we are fearful when these fragile parts of ourselves are exposed, being met with kindness and love, being truly heard for where you're at, will help us move from fear into joy. This is the good news of Christ - this love of God is always here for us, in our most vulnerable and strongest parts of being human, and that love will truly never end.

Even in the midst of great fear, there is good news of great joy. Jesus is that good news who indeed brings us great joy. The joy that not only comes from the birth of a beloved baby, but the everlasting joy that comes from knowing Jesus is the Messiah, Emmanuel, God with us. God is always with us, always coming alongside us by the power of the Holy Spirit and indeed within and around us, as Jesus knows what it is to be human.

When we hear the Christmas story, these familiar words we often ponder in our hearts, we sometimes skip over some of the middle parts to then get to the good part at the end - the good news of great joy. The birth after which mother and baby are both healthy. The star that leads the shepherds to the

newborn Christ Jesus. And yet these middle parts are what really stand out in today's world and today's readings of the old, old story.

Being pregnant and having a newborn baby are certainly vulnerable states to be in. And though Mary said yes to God's calling to mother Jesus, I imagine there was certainly some fear mixed in with her decision, given the societal standards for women at the time. I imagine Joseph's fear for Mary's well-being as they traveled and couldn't find a comfortable, secure place for her to give birth after all they went through. And the shepherds, the neighbors around the town of Bethlehem were absolutely filled with fear - they were terrified when the angel appeared to them and shone with the full glory of the Lord.

My lawyer dad likes to quote Ben Franklin, that the two things we know for sure will happen in life are death and taxes. Thanks, Dad. The tax part is, perhaps not excitingly, how this Christmas story starts - Joseph takes his little family to his hometown of Bethlehem to be registered for the census and so the Roman government knows how much tax income it will receive from this particular area. And as Joseph and Mary continue travelling for these purposes, Mary goes into labor while riding on a donkey. I haven't given birth before, but I imagine going into labor while riding a donkey in ancient Israel is probably one of the least comfortable places to begin that whole process. Many of us can relate to the need to pay taxes and the age-old fear of what happens once a woman starts laboring, especially with her first baby.

And once Mary has safely given birth to Jesus, thanks be to God, we hear the perspective of the shepherds on this most holy night. The shepherds were minding their usual business, their everyday tasks, keeping watch over their flocks by night, in the cover of darkness, to protect the sheep from both animals and people who may want to harm or take them. When in the midst of their same day to day (or night to night) activities, they are interrupted by an angel of God, making bold declarations, and shining in the middle of the night with the full glory of the Lord. No wonder they were terrified! The biggest and holiest interruption imaginable appears to them

so suddenly, and indeed changes their course of action in ways that were long anticipated but hard to believe. They make the bold decision, empowered by their faith, to believe the words of the angel, say yes to the calling God gave them, and immediately set out to find Jesus, this humble baby, lying in a manger, wrapped in humble cloth, and from those lowly beginnings, he would indeed change the world.

The shepherds' story of Christmas is one that could not be told without the initial reaction of fear. And God met them in that fear, not chastising or belittling them for those feelings, but instead encouraged them, helped to give them clear next steps, and indeed by following these steps God laid before them, their lives were forever changed. Their hearts and minds were filled with joy, with good news and life-saving love, made human in this little baby Jesus. Mary saw that journey and delighted in their story, pondering their words in her heart and treasuring them. She more than just about anyone in that situation knows how powerful and life-changing it is to say yes to God's calling and boldly follow in those steps, and how following God leads us from even our greatest fear into the greatest joy of life. Though these moments of fear may seem challenging or vulnerable, it is from that place of fear that God meets us and leads us into joy.

Here is my hope and my prayer for us all this Christmas. I pray that we will embrace the fragility and vulnerability of being human and celebrate them. We all have so much more in common than we do in difference, and these things that join us together in one common humanity are the path towards a world more centered on good news and great joy. I pray that we will move from a place of fear of other people, fear of the unknown, fear of what the future might hold, and fear that turns into violence - move away from these fears into a place of good news. I pray that we will see others and the world with a lens of curiosity and kindness, just as our biblical forebears did too, even in the face of great fear. They asked questions, trusted in God's word, and took the next right step that was in front of them. Christmas is a time of reconnection, with our church life, our family, even ourselves as we think about our relationship to this newborn king, Jesus Christ. Let's reconnect with Christ, reconnect with our neighbors, and know that there is indeed

great joy to be found in that connection. May you be blessed with the hope and joy born to us in Christ Jesus, today and always. Thanks be to God. Amen.