

*“Birth: Possibility, Promise...and Pain”*  
*Christmas Eve Meditation 2008, Plymouth Cong’l UCC*  
*The Reverends Sharon Benton & Hal Chorpenning,*

The angel voice echoes through the ages, telling us “be not afraid” –  
but there seems to be much to fear this year.

There are economic challenges that seem to grow bigger each day;  
there are layoffs affecting friends, family,  
and perhaps some here among us;  
nations continue to be at war or threaten new wars imminently;  
and just this week I read that even recycling –  
one thing that helps us feel better about opening  
packages wrapped in paper – is endangered,  
because there is less demand for recyclable materials.

There seems much to fear.

Yet we have chosen to come to church this evening, to hear an old, old story.

We have chosen to set aside our fears for a little while to celebrate the birth of a child.

And doesn’t birth entail its own fears?

Think about Mary for a moment. Imagine yourself in her place.

You are from a peasant family in a backwater of the Roman Empire, and your family’s very existence is in question day to day.

*Be not afraid?*

You are a teenager. Unmarried. Pregnant.

*Be not afraid?*

Away from home and family.

In a strange town with no place to stay.

And then your water breaks.

You’re without benefit of modern healthcare,  
without certainty that either you or your son would even survive.

*Be not afraid?*

And then you’re shown to a stable to give birth...with no epidural.

*Be not afraid?*

But it's not only Mary who receives this unlikely angelic greeting:

shepherds guarding their livelihood in the deep night needed the reassuring message;  
and Joseph – hoping to quietly set aside this tainted girl –  
also needed the nudging of such words:

“Be not afraid.”

Why *not* be afraid?

Why not give in to the sorrows of what is, of the realities we face?  
What is it that keeps us coming back to these stories,  
to church on Christmas Eve,  
to our faith in a child-born Messiah?

~~~

The angels tell us “be not afraid” *not* because there is nothing to fear.

They tell us “be not afraid” because there is *Good News*  
despite the reality of hard times and situations.

There is hope...there is God's promise.

Mary's song of blessing shouts that

“God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts  
has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty”.

In Mary's song, responding to knowledge of the life growing in her womb,  
there is a statement of reversals. Of change!

And change is a scary thing.

Of course the divine message tells us not to fear when fear is our natural response to change.

And yet this birth calls us to just that – transformation.

Any of you who have children know that the birth of a child changes your entire life.

Nothing is ever the same.

And *this* birth, celebrated on *this* night, is the epitome of change.

Again, not just for his mother or father or for shepherds or magi;  
not just for the disciples who will eventually follow him as a grown man;  
but for us, even now.

This birth means change for us – and there is still no epidural that will make it happen painlessly.

It isn't that we are guaranteed a life devoid of pain – we aren't!

Rather, it's that we are given the tools of faith, of trust, of support that enable us not only to move beyond fear, but to embrace faith.

William Sloane Coffin once said that,

“Faith is being grasped by love. . . . God is infinite mercy, not infinite control.”

And yet, Mary seemed able to hear and to embody what the angel was saying.

Her faith was not an anesthetic, it was a source of strength, hope, and most of all, love.

Childbirth is not an antiseptic, clean proposition: it's messy and not without danger for mother and child.

And yet it's a threshold of change that we, all of us, have come through:

a threshold that changes everything as new life emerges.

No, it's not as warm and dark as life within the womb.

But, it is a threshold of infinite possibility.

Bill Coffin also said that “God provides **minimum protection, maximum support**—support to help us grow up, to stretch our minds and hearts until they are as wide as God's universe. God doesn't want us narrow-minded, priggish, and subservient, but joyful and loving, as free for one another as God's love was freely poured out for us at Christmas in that babe in the manger.”<sup>1</sup>

And that babe in a manger was no stranger to pain.

He often went against the grain when his relationship with God called him

to oppose the religious and political authorities of his day,

to proclaim a realm of radical reversal in which the last are to be first and the first are to be last. . .

to be an agent of transformation.

The life of Jesus was not without pain, adversity, or conflict, *but it was a life seemingly without fear.*

---

<sup>1</sup> William Sloane Coffin, *Credo*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 10.

~~~

In our own time, there are glimpses of hope coming into clearer view.

We have elected the country's first African-American president... something many of us didn't think we'd see in our lifetimes.

We have rediscovered a sense of our country's place among the nations of the world, which may lead to a less bellicose foreign policy.

And perhaps as a nation we will learn to rely more on each other than we have in the past... becoming more of a commonwealth and less of a consumer-driven society.

Yet, there will still be no epidural as we step across this threshold.

An early Christian wrote that

"I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Whatever our personal, familial, national, or global circumstances, we have "maximum support" that drives us toward hope.

And on this night, we gather with each other in this place to celebrate the coming of the light into the world:

the light of all lights,  
the hope of all hopes,  
the love of all loves.

Gathered into the life of an infant.

Mary heard it.

Joseph knew it by heart.

The shepherds felt its resounding beat across the valleys and plains.

Even the magi saw it written across the night sky:

***Be not afraid!***

Amen.