



**December 18, 2005**

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Sue Verboom

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Luke 1:47-55

Luke 1:26-38

## “Fear and Joy”

The telephone rings. “Don’t be alarmed,” says the voice after you answer. “This is the junior high calling. Your daughter had an accident in gym class.” “Don’t be alarmed”?? As soon as you heard those words, your heart pounded in fear!

CRASH! The loud musical sound of glass shattering comes from the kitchen. After a brief but disturbing silence you hear your grandson’s voice calling, “Don’t worry Grandpa! I’ve got everything under control!” Do you stay where you are, in the comfortable recliner, reading the morning paper? Don’t worry! All is under control! In spite of the words of reassurance, you quickly head for the kitchen to see for yourself.

The doorbell rings. Your husband answers it. He returns to say softly, “Honey, don’t be afraid, but that was just some important news....”

“Don’t be afraid.” “Don’t worry.” “Don’t be alarmed.” What is our immediate response to such reassuring words? Why, immediately we feel alarmed, worried, afraid! Such a rush of concern pours through our veins that we can almost feel the adrenaline pumping.

Given this aspect of our nature, we can well imagine the response of a teenager in Galilee, in the town called Nazareth, around two thousand years ago. Not only did she have the surprising experience of being visited by an angel, but his first words to her were, “Don’t be afraid, Mary.”

Friends, we have been preparing these past weeks for God's arrival in our midst. We certainly know our NEED for a Savior. When we look at our world, and at ourselves, we see great pain and wrong everywhere. We LONG for God to come to be with us. But sometimes when we experience God crashing into our lives with EXPECTATIONS and CHALLENGING TASKS, our longing turns to fear.

Why? Why did Mary feel so afraid?

Our Christmas story shows she wasn't the only one to feel afraid in the presence of angels. Those shepherds out in the fields on the night of Jesus' birth were terrified when the angels appeared, even though they came proclaiming good news of great joy to all people.

We long for God's nearness, but can be overwhelmed when we encounter it. Because, you see, God is BOTH a God of merciful love AND a God of POWER. We are afraid of things we can't control that have great power: tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, disease. God has great power and we are not in charge of God in any way.

Some of you may have read The Chronicles of Narnia by C. S. Lewis. A film based on the first book, The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe is being released this month. The story describes the adventures of four children in an imaginary land ruled by evil powers. There, in Narnia, they meet a lion named Aslan. C. S. Lewis was a British Christian theologian who, through these fantasy books, told the story of Christ. Aslan represents the great King of Kings.

I will never forget what one child said about him. After being asked what Aslan was like by another child, he struggled to find words.

The questioning child went on, "He's a LION! Aren't you afraid of him? Is he SAFE?" The child who had met Aslan pondered, then replied, "No, he's not SAFE. He's GOOD."

That, for me, describes God's coming to us. He comes BOTH in power and in grace. God is not SAFE. God is not harmless, innocuous, to be tamed or kept as a pet. God's POWER, combined with his EXPECTATIONS of us, can lead us to feel, like Mary and the shepherds, afraid.

Yet, like the lion Aslan, God is also GOOD. God will never do anything that isn't good. God is a God of GRACE. One who loves us, comes to us, and saves us. And that brings us JOY.

Think about Mary. As she heard the angel's words, she struggled. Because what God was planning didn't seem possible to her. It seemed far-fetched. Oh, sure, it was GOOD. A child would be born. Brought into this world through her body. That was GOOD. The child would be God's child, in a unique way. That was GOOD. The child would grow up, and be the ruler of a great kingdom. That sure sounded GOOD. But how could it be? She was an unmarried virgin, a poor, simple young girl, not royalty, not important, not even married. The angel's reply proclaimed God's power: "Nothing will be impossible with God."

Mary let that power sweep over her. She felt the goodness of God. She said, "OK, God. It's your show. Count me in." And joy filled her being. She spoke words arising from that joy in a passage called the "Magnificat", our first Scripture for today.

Mary's words of joy describe how God's coming turns the world upside down. Our human ways are not SAFE when they are opposed to God's will. God scatters the proud, casts down the mighty and exalts the humble. God fills the hungry, sends the rich away empty.

God is coming to us, here in St. Charles, this year. God is coming, and when God comes God stirs things up. There is a revolution in each heart that receives Christ. Our God is not SAFE. Our God is GOOD. They are not the same. But God's goodness will bring us joy, if we follow his ways.

Virginia Kammerer will now share with us how God came to her in his goodness, with his power and his expectations, leading her to Nagaland in India on a church mission trip. God was at work casting down the mighty and exalting the humble on that trip. The situation God led them into was at times very frightening. But God's goodness never wavered.

(Virginia came forward to speak)

Virginia's story is a Christmas story- a story of God coming into human life, in ways that may lead to FEAR, but always carry us to JOY if we decide to trust him.

Watch out for secular Christmas sentimentality that makes the Christmas story a sweet, harmless tale for tiny tots. The REAL Christmas story tells of a REAL and mighty God who entered human flesh in our world. An infinite God of power who came to us in a baby. A roaring lion, who came as a lamb to be slaughtered. But make no mistake. This God is not SAFE. This God is GOOD. They are not the same. But if at first we fear him, his goodness will bring us joy, if we, like Mary, say, "OK, God, it's your show. Count me in."

God is coming to each of us this year. And he wonders, what will be our response to his coming? Will we, like Mary, say, “OK, God, it’s your show. Count me in!”? Every year, we decide. What will YOUR decision be?