



AND THE ANGEL SAID...

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This is our second week in our Christmas series that I'm calling "Twas the Night: Thoughts on the 'before' of Christmas." We're looking at some of the conditions and dynamics that God brought into being just prior to Jesus' birth. There were things that prepared people for what God was about to do. Some of them weren't all that comfortable as we saw last week.

Speaking of last week, we had the big junior high Christmas party at our house last Sunday night. Pretty much all of their events are now attracting 20 some kids, which is great. But it meant we were pushing furniture back everywhere we could to make room. Have you seen those big RVs with the walls that push out for a larger living area? I wish they made houses like that. That way, when we needed it, we could just slide the back of our house out a ways, then pull it back in after the party.

That's kind of what I see God doing in these "befores" – pushing the furniture back, stretching the walls to make space for what he's about to do. All that pushing doesn't necessarily feel great at the time. Last week we talked about the role powerlessness can play in our lives. God sometimes allows us to reach a point where we're completely powerless and not in control. We said nobody likes being in that spot, but it can be an essential experience for helping us turn to God and his power. In our weakness, he is strong.

We looked at the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth last Sunday, and this morning I'd like to look briefly at four parts of the Christmas story to see a common thread. We'll revisit Zechariah first, then also review the angel visits to Joseph, Mary and the shepherds.

Luke 1:8-14

Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshippers were praying outside.

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John."

Luke 1:26-31

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God."

Matthew 1:18-23

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"-which means, "God with us."

Luke 2:8-10

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people."

Four different angel visits. Four different messages. We've looked at these conversations in years past, and we've noted the one recurring theme in all of them: Do not be afraid. Those words were spoken every time a messenger from heaven arrived, and I imagine if you or I met up with an angel, we'd have to be told that same thing.

These people were all feeling fearful. But I noticed something else for the first time. As much as the angels were saying, "Don't be afraid," God was the one who had created the potentially fearful situation in the first place. These people were feeling what they did because God brought them to a spot where fear was the natural reaction. It is as if God intended for them to face a choice between being afraid and not being afraid.

And when you begin to look more closely at the angels' words, you get the feeling that the initial fear of angels was only part of the fear each person was experiencing. In those encounters, other deep fears were revealed.

Are you familiar at all with depth charges? Back in World War I and more so in World War II, the Germans had their dangerous fleet of U-boat submarines, which posed a real threat to the allied forces. So the British and American navies developed these depth charges they would drop in the water. They were just big canisters of explosive, rigged to detonate at certain levels. The canisters would explode near the submarine. Usually, the explosions didn't cause enough damage to sink the submarine – they just shook it and loosened it enough that it had to surface or risk filling with water. Once it was on the surface and could be seen, then it could be dealt with far more easily.

Sometimes, God puts us in a situation that surfaces our fears. Something will happen, a crisis will occur, and suddenly we're dealing with issues and emotions we didn't even know were down inside us.

Let me clarify something before we go any further. The Bible specifically says that God does not give us a spirit of fear, and I am not suggesting that God is in the habit of trying to scare people. He isn't. But he is in the business of revealing our fears, surfacing them so they can be dealt with. Sometimes we have ways of operating that aren't healthy. They hurt us or they hurt other people. And we don't even know the fears we've buried that are motivating our actions. God is in the business of healing us up, and part of that includes shining a light on what's hidden. Jesus said,

John 8:32

Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

When these angels made their appearances, they caused anxiety by just showing up, but more importantly they tapped into some deep-seated fears that went beyond the shock and surprise of meeting an angel. I believe all four of our conversations show that.

Why do I say that? Let's look at each case a little more closely. Now I'll admit – I'm playing psychologist here a bit. Matthew and Luke don't elaborate much on the emotional state of these people. But I think we'll be in line with where the text points in the few clues the authors give us.

Let's go back to Zechariah. He was startled to see the angel standing next to the altar. It's kind of a sad commentary that he was so surprised. Here he was, working in the most sacred part of the temple. He's the priest. His job was to go in and burn incense before the Lord. He's in the business of dealing with holy things. Yet he still wasn't expecting to have any kind of true spiritual encounter. It shocked him when it happened.

How often have I done the same thing – going through the motions of prayer or going to church or reading my Bible without any real expectation that God will show up and do something. Then when he does, I'm caught completely off guard.

Zechariah was more than caught off guard. The text says he was gripped with fear. Have you ever been gripped with fear? I once decided to go up and clean the roof. This was at our old house that had a shake roof. I was using a pressure nozzle on the hose, wearing

my sneakers. I'm not really sure why I thought the combination of water, cedar shakes and sneakers would be a good one. But it wasn't. I slipped and began to slide toward the edge of the roof. I was literally sliding toward a two story drop. I stretched out my hands and it was only by the grace of God and my untrimmed fingernails that I stopped before the edge. But then I couldn't move. It scared me so bad I had to lay there for a while. My pulse was racing. I couldn't breathe. It felt like something was holding me down. Have you ever had that kind of a fear? The shortness of breath. A choking sensation. It's a panic attack.

Fear can be completely paralyzing and debilitating. It can interfere with our ability to function. No wonder God wants to help us get to the root of it and get rid of it. He wants us to be whole and healthy and at peace. Fear can prevent us from reaching out to other people or making hard choices or going where we know we're called to go.

That's what Zechariah was going through when he was gripped with fear. He couldn't just keep lighting the incense and praying – he was derailed by terror.

So of course the angel says, "Don't be afraid." But what I would expect him to say next is, "I'm not going to hurt you," or "I'm a friend." What seems most natural would be for him to try and reassure Zechariah that he wasn't the angel of death sent to destroy him. But instead, he says this:

Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard.

Your prayer. Your one special prayer you thought would never come true. That's a twist. The angel's way of responding to Zechariah's fear is to tell him his prayer has been answered. That's completely unrelated to the shock of the moment. Not only that, the prayer he's talking about is an old prayer, one Zechariah probably hadn't prayed for years. We noted last week that Zechariah and Elizabeth had given up the idea of having a baby. This was no longer a top-of-mind issue. So the angel says, "Do not be afraid, your prayer from 20 years ago has been answered."

The fear of the moment and the prayer sound like two unrelated statements, but it suggests to me that Zechariah may have been carrying a fear around with him that he had buried long ago. The initial surprise of seeing an angel -- that was just the depth charge to uncover a greater **fear about God**. That's the fear that our prayers WON'T be answered. It's the fear that God isn't listening, either because he doesn't exist or he doesn't care or because we've messed something up along the way and our request is being denied.

If I were Zechariah, I think I would have wrestled with those kinds of questions. When that kind of fear gets hold of us, we begin to doubt. We withdraw from God. We withdraw from other people, because we don't want them to know we're feeling this way. We give up on the praying or we go through the motions to pretend we're doing fine, and all the while this nagging fear keeps whispering in our ear, "It's pointless. Nobody's listening."

When I was reading up on the use of depth charges in World War II, I was struck by how civilized the process generally was. Americans would set off the charges, the damaged submarine would surface, the German crew would abandon ship, the Americans would go gather them up, THEN they would blow the submarine out of the water. They really sought to minimize casualties. But they didn't just force the sub to the surface to say – "See, I told you there was a submarine." They wanted to get rid of it.

God does not want our fears to surface just for the sake of knowing them. He wants to blow them out of the water. **God first reveals our fears, but then he relieves them.** Over and over again in Scripture, we have quotes from God telling people to not be afraid, to have courage. His desire in our lives is to remove our fears.

The angel speaks directly to Zechariah's heart, answering once and for all the question of whether or not God hears our prayer. He says ABSOLUTELY. God has heard all this time. Those prayers you prayed years ago, Zechariah, and never thought would be answered – guess what? God has not forgotten them. The form and shape and timing of his answer may be different than you expected, but he still hears and answers.

What's more **his answer is more right than our request.** Zechariah just wanted his own heir. God gave him a son that would impact the whole world. Zechariah was only thinking of his own child, but God was thinking of how that child fit into all of history. Not only did God answer Zechariah's prayer – he answered in a way that was far more of an answer than Zechariah ever imagined.

God meets our deepest fears with even deeper reassurance, even deeper answers. To the question, "Is God really listening?" the angel's reply is a resounding yes. I love how Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians:

2 Corinthians 1:20

For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ.

Yes I hear. Yes I will answer. Yes I will do even greater things than you can possibly imagine. Do not be afraid. Your prayer has been heard.

Zechariah may have been afraid his prayer would go unanswered, But Mary didn't seem to have prayer on her mind at all. What I love about the angel's interaction with each of these people is that every conversation is tailored to the individual. Even though the basic announcement of Christ's coming applied to all of them, God spoke to each person according to their own need.

We've all got different fears and God speaks to us one by one. Let's look again at what he said to Mary through his angel.

The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God."

Unlike Zechariah, the appearance of the angel didn't bother Mary nearly so much as what he said. Maybe this is further proof that women are better listeners than men. In any case, she was alarmed by the angel's message and racked her brain to try and figure out what he meant.

Mary's fears were centered around her **identity**. Why would the angel greet her like that? She was nothing special. She was about as unimportant as a person could be in 1st century Palestine – a teenage girl from a tiny, no-name town. She wasn't on anyone's radar as the next "it" girl. What could God possibly find interesting about her? Why would he single her out?

As she's thinking that, the angel restates what he's already said so there is no question about what he meant. "Don't be afraid. You have found favor with God. He thoroughly enjoys you. He is pouring out his grace on you in a special way. This is a really good thing Mary."

You know, there are only two other people that the Bible speaks of in this kind of language, as having found favor with God. One is Noah. The other is Moses. That's some pretty heady company to find yourself in.

For both of them, "finding favor with God" involved an assignment. "Noah, I want you to build an ark that will save people and animals from the coming flood." "Moses, I want you to go to Egypt and rescue my people." These were big jobs that turned them into key figures in God's great effort to bring salvation to the world.

So as Mary heard herself being included with these men, it was intimidating. Her fear was similar to what Moses felt. He once told God, "Oh Lord, please send somebody else." The prospect of being involved in something that significant terrified him.

There are times when we all would rather be anonymous than be singled out by God. Our view of ourselves can make us feel insecure about doing something for God. It's frightening to think we have a responsibility to be part of his plan. Yet because Jesus came, we're all favored by God. We're all recipients of his grace and love. And he has planned for us to join with him in sharing that favor with the world. You and I can have all kinds of excuses as to why we shouldn't be part of his plan. I don't know enough. I'm really busy right now. I'm not good at that. They're all good reasons, but they stem from a fear that God's grace and favor won't be enough to accomplish what he wants to through us. That's what it comes down to – we're afraid God isn't enough, that his love for us isn't strong enough, that his promises aren't specific enough, that his strength won't last long enough. We're somehow the exception that he won't be able to handle.

When we first started thinking about planting a new church, my biggest hurdle was that I could not see myself as a pastor. My whole career had been advertising. It didn't feel like a natural jump to me at all, and I resisted for a long time. There was an actual form I needed to fill out to get the ball rolling and I sat on it for a year and a half, because I would get afraid when I went to work on it and it would literally turn my stomach. I had to reach a point where I gave in and said, "Ok, God. You know how you made me. You know what I don't think I can do. I'm going to have to trust that you know what you're doing."

As the church got rolling, I don't think anybody in our initial core group had ever helped start a church before. Many people felt out of their element. Marisa had never headed up a children's program. Dan Peek had never been a board chairman. We had all kinds of people on our first mission team that had never done anything like that before.

And I'm sure there have been drawbacks to all this collective inexperience. But we've been able to see God's grace fill up the holes we've left empty. We can't let fear stand in the way of what God has said about our identity. We are favored. You are favored. You're part of his story. He has a role for you to fill.

If you've ever said, "Oh I could never do that," or "I think God would rather work through somebody else," I would encourage you today to hear the angel's words to Mary. Not only does his favor means he accepts you – it means he can work through you. God's grace and favor make you fully capable for whatever he calls you to do.

Do not be afraid. You have found favor with God.

Mary was quicker to get beyond her fears than me. She accepted the angel's message and was willing to take the risk. That choice didn't just impact her, though. She was engaged to Joseph at the time, and when she told him about what had happened, he was at a loss over what to do. He finally came up with a plan.

Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

Our society is so relaxed about sex and babies outside of marriage that it's hard to fully grasp just how much of a scandal this would have been for Mary and Joseph. Joseph had a reputation as a good man. If he married Mary, people would assume he was the guilty father. Joseph doesn't want to see her shamed, but it's a little difficult to trust her now. She's come up with this pretty unbelievable story of how she got pregnant. He doesn't want to be taken advantage of or made to look foolish.

When the angel comes to him in the dream, he tells him, "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife." That tells me that: 1), he still wanted to marry her and 2), he was fearful of the repercussions. What would other people think? What would his relationship with Mary be like? How could he, as a righteous man, get that close to somebody who had violated God's law so blatantly?

Some of our biggest fears revolve around relationships. What do other people think of me? Sometimes we're the ones forming the opinions, like Joseph did with Mary. Our misjudging of other people can make us afraid of getting to know them.

The angel tells Joseph, "It's not how it looks. Forget appearances. Forget what other people think. What's happening with Mary is from God, and that's the only thing that matters. And you know what? The son you will raise is going to be the one who deals with the most important relationship of all. You think everyone is looking at you to decide whether or not you're a good person based on what you do. But their opinions don't matter to God. Rightness with God is going to come from Jesus and not from how well you please other people."

Maybe you feel like God is surfacing some fears in your life that have to do with relationships. You're beginning to see where you're held captive by what other people think, or you've kept people at a distance out of fear when you don't really even know much about them. Maybe for a lifetime you've made assessments about people that were made on one experience a long time ago. God can free you the same way he did Joseph – by taking your attention to the primary relationship that is totally secure in Jesus. As we become more grounded in our connection with him, other relationships will start to fall into perspective.

There's one last angel encounter, and that's with the shepherds. Since we've now probably all forgotten what those verses said, let's look at it again:

Luke 2:8-10

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people."

These poor shepherds. They didn't know what hit them. Everyone we've talked about so far seems a bit on the spiritual side, a bit too good to be true. But these guys are just your average, working guys. They're not thinking about God. They're not worried about their reputations. They're just doing their job.

For them, the fear was pretty straightforward. It was **fear of the unknown**. They looked like a bunch of tough guys sitting around in the field, until the angel showed up. It was such a foreign, surreal experience that they were instantly petrified.

There is something deep in human nature that is deathly afraid of the unknown. Our minds go wild when they don't have enough information about something. Think about the last time somebody in your family was late coming home, and you couldn't reach them. The more time that passed, the more worried you got as you imagined every possible horrible scenario. Or the unknown feeling when you're waiting to hear how you did on a test. Or the unknown of death or the future or even God.

There are so many things we don't really know much about, and most of the time we don't give them much thought. But then something happens to bring it to our attention and we are reminded of how much it terrifies us.

Just like the shepherds. They probably weren't thinking much about spiritual things out in the field, but when they were suddenly confronted by an angel, all their fears about God and the unknown spiritual realm immediately bubbled up. They didn't know what to make of their visitor and it shook them to the core.

Their fear of the unknown was exposed. And just like in the other cases, where God revealed fear, he relieved it. Look what the angel said next:

"Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

The shepherds were terrified of this unknowable, invisible, frightening God. So what does he do? He becomes a little baby – the least frightening thing possible. The shepherds don't know anything about God's glory, but they do understand barns and mangers. God's answer to their fear of the unknown was to become knowable.

When we are overwhelmed by the prospect of the unknown, God points us to Jesus as our reference for what is real. Corrie Ten Boom once said, "Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God." Even when he doesn't choose to reveal the specifics of what lies ahead, the more we get to know him, the more we can trust him to take care of what we don't know.

It doesn't have to be the future. The same is true for other unknowns. When we are in despair because of some pain we're experiencing and we don't understand how God could allow it, Jesus shows us the God of all comfort who also suffered. When our unanswered prayers have us discouraged, we can look to Jesus, who knew the same feelings as he wrested in prayer before his crucifixion.

Philip Yancey writes about a time he bought an Oxford English Dictionary with every word in the English language. Normally it takes up 20 volumes and costs \$3,000 to buy, but he bought a single volume version for \$39.95. The only catch is you can't read it without a magnifying glass. So he also bought one of those big magnifying glasses like jewelers use, with a swivel arm and everything.

He writes and says what he learned about magnifying glasses is that as long as he's looking through the center, everything is in focus, but the further he looks toward the edges, the fuzzier the words would become.

And he says Jesus is like that magnifying glass for our faith. When we're afraid of the unknown, Jesus gives us a close up view of God and lets us know him. And as long as

he's the center of our lens, things are clear. But as our eyes wander off of him, making sense of things gets much more difficult.

I don't know what fears you're facing this morning, whether they are related to God, your own identity, relationships or the unknown. Maybe it's all of them, or maybe it's something else entirely. What I do know is that God brings situations in our lives that will cause those fears to reveal themselves. They will rise to the surface and try their best to intimidate you. But the point is not just to know our fears – it's to overcome them. God wants to relieve those fears and set you free.

Two questions stand waiting to be asked today:

What's my u-boat? What fear has been lurking under the surface that I can now see more clearly? Fear is strongest when it is general, so the more specifically we can identify it, the less power it has.

Secondly, where am I looking for courage? Over and over again, the angel pointed to the arrival of Jesus as the reason not to fear. He's our rock that can't be shaken.

Fred Cropp, the former president of the American Bible Society, once said, "There is much in the world to make us afraid. There is much more in our faith to make us unafraid."

I'd like to just pray this morning for those of you who are facing fears right now.

Fears about God

Are you worried he's not hearing you? Are you afraid of what his answer will be? He is listening. He is real. He wants to take that fear from you.

Fears about your own place and identity

Are you having a hard time believing God has a place for you? Are you afraid of what that could mean? Are you afraid God doesn't like you? You've found favor with God.

Fears about relationships

Are you overly concerned about what other people think? Is there someone you've been afraid to reach out to? You'll find greater security in your human relationships as you find security through Jesus in your relationship with God.

Fears about the unknown

Is there something ahead that is causing you fear – a future you aren't sure about? Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God.

Don't be afraid. Your prayer has been answered. Don't be afraid. You've found favor with God. Don't be afraid. Jesus has made you right with God. Don't be afraid. This is good news of great joy for all people.

