

While I had years of lessons at the YMCA, I’m pretty sure I actually learned to swim in the Atlantic Ocean. My brothers and I we’d run right into the water, bobbing with the surf, riding the waves. We didn’t seem to notice that the water off the coast of Maine was frigid; we’d be shivering, our lips long since turned blue when our folks would call us in to warm up. Even at a young age, nothing could stop us. We were fearless in those waves. Fearless.

Until one day, when we had moved further south, when the beach was no longer the one we were used to. When the patterns of the surf, of the riptide, of the undertow were so different that what we were used to. We were still fearless, at least at first, venturing further and further out into the water in search of the perfect wave. Bobbing in the surf, jumping in the waves, until suddenly, without notice, I was separated from my brother, and found myself not just way down the shore but much farther out than we had intended. And the undertow that I had not experienced before was starting to take hold. Nathan made it to shore and keeping an eye on where I was, called out to my dad, who swam right out, and though it seemed at the time to take forever, in reality he was there in a flash, grabbing on to me, bringing me back to shore, reassuring me constantly with these words:

I’m here now. I’ve got you. Don’t be afraid.

Don’t be afraid. This is the peculiar greeting of the angel to the shepherds. Actually, it’s a greeting uttered so often by angels in the Bible that it may as well be the official greeting of the heavenly angels, of God’s holy messengers. Like something they might teach you in Angel school, how you should always open your angel monologue with this greeting. Do not be afraid, or depending according to some translation. Do not fear; or even Fear Not.

Do not be afraid, the angel tells the shepherd. Yeah, right. Do not fear, even though their homeland was under the occupation of a foreign empire, whose imperial ruler had decided to declare himself to be God. Do not fear, even all of the imperial subjects were ordered to head back to their ancestral villages to be counted. Counted for what? Taxes, we can assume, to build roads and aqueducts, of course, but also to weapons of mass destruction, not to mention simply enriching the emperor himself. Don’t be afraid, the angel said even as they knew they were among the poorest of the poor, living out there in the fields with their sheep. Be not afraid, they said, even as the sky lit up in the middle of the night with a entire army of winged messengers speaking and shouting and singing. Were they being ironic? Or maybe just overwhelmingly obvious: Hey there, this might seem overwhelmingly frightening, folks, so let me just start by saying ***Don’t*** be afraid. Do not be afraid.

See, fear ***is*** a pretty logical reaction to all this for the shepherd, as it would be for you or me, right? And when it comes right down to it, we’re all afraid of something. Different things, to be sure. But aren’t we all a little afraid? These days, perhaps even more than a little. Maybe we’re afraid of global terrorism, endless war, or increasing gun violence. Certain politicians and members of the media seem to delight in fanning those fears, in trying to make us feel more—not less—afraid. More personally, we might be afraid of the uncertainty of the future, as loved ones age and die, as children leave the nest, as we ponder

what is around the next bend in our own future, or simply as we wonder how we might make it through the craziness of the next couple of holidays in tight corners with our own relatives or, God forbid, in-laws. Maybe we're afraid as we think about our next paycheck—or afraid we'll have to make cuts to our household or even our congregational budget. Many of these fears are rational, logical, genuine. We can and do have real fears about the uncertainties of our world, our church, our family, our school.

But friends, think for a minute about at least these two things concerning the angel's words. First, try hearing these words "do not be afraid" not as a judgment on those who might be fearful, but as a word of liberation and release. The angel is not scolding, saying "how dare you be afraid," or "you must be weak or stupid or lacking faith if you are afraid." No, the angel's words are meant to be more like this: I know you feel afraid; I know you are afraid. but you don't need to be afraid anymore. God is here. God's got this. Relax. Do not be afraid anymore. I think that's what these words spoken by the angel mean.

And notice this, too. The angel doesn't stop with the words "do not be afraid." That's not the sum total of the angelic message. That's just the preamble, the introduction. The angel continues right on into the heart of the message: "Don't be afraid," the angel says, "Don't be afraid because, look, I bring you good news of great joy for ALL the people. You don't have to be afraid anymore, because this good news is for you—God has come. God is here. God's got this. God's got you. Jesus—Emmanuel, God with us—is here. Good news of great joy for all the fearful people."

Yes, we who have very real fears, very real pains, very real losses this year, maybe even for many years in a row, we don't need to be afraid anymore. God is here. God's got this. God's got us. God is with us. In all things, God is with us.

My sisters and brothers, on this Holy Night of Christmas and throughout the coming year, and for many more days and years to come, may you hear and know and experience what the angels announced, what the shepherds witnessed, what Mary pondered in her heart, what we gather week after week to proclaim. **That Christ has been born among us. That Emmanuel has come. That Jesus is here. And that in all things, God is now with us.**

Thanks be to God. Merry Christmas.