

Come, Let Us Adore Him.
Christmas 2015



**Lord,
May we not spend Christmas,
but keep it.
That we may kept in its hope
through Him who emptied himself
in coming to us,
that we may be filled
with peace and joy
in returning to God through Him.
In whose name we pray,
Amen**

Welcome to St. Martin's by the Lake on this Christmas Eve. And while I have you, I would like to try to answer a question: "Why, exactly, are we here?" Let us together explore the answer to that question.

Sociologists, talking heads and opinion makers are telling us that we are living in fearful times. They tell us that we are the most fearful we've been since 9/11, which was the most fearful, as some will remember, we've been since Pearl Harbour.

Pulitzer Prize winning author Marilynne Robinson recently wrote about this sense of dread in the New York Times stating that: we are a nation full of fear, and that fear is *not* a Christian habit of mind.

In a recent conversation with a Clergy friend, he felt that in conversations in his Church and in the community, "Fear was driving the truck." My concern is that, if we're not careful, we will allow this fear to influence our direction. As you know I am an immigrant here, and I have experienced this country at its best to be a welcoming and hospitable land of freedom and opportunity for my family and me. May we remember the reconciling words of President Abraham Lincoln, and "listen to the better angels of our nature."

And still, there is this fear.

I recently polled our parish's leadership and asked them if they were aware of the sense of dread that many are describing. Yes, they said, they were aware of this fearful feeling, but in many ways it is just one more thing to added onto the fears, concerns and challenges they face in the everyday living of their lives. As a priest and pastor of the Church, I am very aware of those living with the fear of a difficult medical prognosis, and the concerns their loved ones have in caring for them. I am also aware of the fears we parents have for our children in a volatile world with so much bad news. I have also walked with parents and grandparents who are challenged by the mental illnesses and addictions that afflict a child or grandchild. And I have in mind today those active armed forces personnel that this community prays for every Sunday, those people who are out there, somewhere, defending us from fear.

Now you might think that I would offer you some form of advice for this Christmas of 2015. But just like you I have my own fears, challenges and concerns. Just like you, what I need more than anything, and the reason why we are here, is to hear from God.

In the Christmas Day Gospel reading we read from John's Gospel, which begins with these words: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

What word from God do we need to hear today?

May I have a quick show of hands, how many of you have watched *A Charlie Brown Christmas* this year? I love this show, and have felt an affinity with Charlie Brown since I first watched this program as a young boy. Even then I would tear up as I watched. I

think we all know the story. Charlie Brown is a bit of a loser; he visits a Psychiatric Booth only to discover that he is afraid...of *everything!* He accepts the challenge of directing the children's Christmas pageant, but fails at that. He goes on to fail at picking out a Christmas tree. He has lived up to his fears, and cries out to find someone, anyone, who knows what Christmas is all about.

At this his friend Linus jumps up. Now Linus clearly has his own issues, carrying a Security Blanket with him at all times, to deal with his own fears and anxieties. He has it with him at all times; he never lets it go.

And Linus quotes the well-known Christmas story: "And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were *sore afraid.*"

"Sore afraid", is of course the old translation, which today would mean, "terrified by fear." The fear it depicts, as the shepherds run for their lives, reminds me of the images of those terrified New Yorkers running for their lives as the Twin Towers crumbled behind them. Moreover, the word Luke, the writer of this Gospel, uses here for fear is the Greek word Phobeos, the root of our English word Phobia.

"And the angel said unto them: 'Fear not.'"

Fear not.

Fear not.

And Linus goes on to say, "For, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord."

This is the 50th anniversary of A Charlie Brown Christmas, garnering the program many tributes. One article, by Jason Soroski explores something in the show I did not know. I've watched it every year since its debut, some years several times, and I've missed it. Now, as I mentioned Linus had his own fear and anxieties, and carried his security blanket as a sign or symbol of them. But there is one time, and the only one I can recall, when Linus drops the blanket. It is in the middle of his description of what Christmas is all about, and it comes when he says the words "Fear not", then he lets it go and drops it.

Fear not.

Fear not.

Fear not.

Soroski goes on to say, “Looking at it now, it’s pretty clear what Charles Schulz, the creator of the Peanuts cartoons, was saying through this, and it’s so simple it’s brilliant.

The birth of Jesus separates us from our fears.

The birth of Jesus frees us from the habits we are unable (or unwilling) to break ourselves.

The birth of Jesus allows us to simply drop the false security we have been grasping so tightly, and learn to trust and cling to him instead.

The world of 2015 can be a scary place, and most of us find ourselves grasping to something temporal for security, whatever that thing may be. Essentially, 2015 is a world in which it is very difficult for us to “fear not.”

But in the midst of fear and insecurity, this simple cartoon image from 1965 continues to live on as an inspiration for us to seek true peace and true security in the one place it has always been and can always still be found.”

Let me suggest, that what we need this Christmas more than anything is to hope again: to listen through the busyness of our lives to the message of angels; to re-discover in the face of our fears good tidings of deep inner joy; and that our families, communities and even the nations will, amidst the bad news, find true Peace on Earth, and Good Will to all who have the sheer audacity to believe.

So, let me hold up to each of us this Christmas the shepherds as our model of not only how to experience this for ourselves, but be transformed from *Fear* to *Fear Not*, in the midst of the changes, chances and challenges of this life.

It helps to know a little about them, these shepherds. Let me dash any romantic notions of biblical shepherds we have from seeing our kids, attired in bathrobes and bath towels, as the cutest little shepherds in all the world in Christmas pageants. In reality, shepherds weren’t considered cute by their neighbours. Shepherds were the lowest caste of society, actually homeless, moving from place to place for pasture. They were in fact feared because they would often steal to survive. And because their occupation made them perpetually unclean they were forbidden from worshipping God in Synagogue or Temple.

And, being the lowest and poorest they lived with constant fear, being pushed aside when anyone more powerful than they would march through. They would be pushed aside when the Romans marched through. They were pushed aside when Herod marched through. They were even pushed aside when the religious elites, the Priests, Scribes and Pharisees marched through.

And it was too these, the least, the last, the lost and the lowest of society that God chose to pronounce the answer to the human race's deepest fears.

They moved from *Fear* to *Fear Not* because they first believed, trusted and had faith in the good news told them by angels. And believing they physically got up and got going, and encountered and experienced God come lo in the flesh in the babe Jesus. For us that is as simple as getting up, going and encountering Him by dwelling with the Christmas story for ourselves as we open Holy Scripture. It is in being present to the worship of Christmas, in this wondrous music and the bread and the cup of Holy Communion. And it is in connecting with Him in the silent prayer of the worshipping heart. And once encountered, the shepherds returned, but now not as fearful outcasts but as a transformed *Fear Not* people. They went everywhere, to everyone, fearlessly, returning to their lives with this story's power to transform life. They became, as this Christmas story again invites us, to be a people who have met the one born to save us from our fears and make us a *Fear Not* people of faith. Just let me say in closing, that this is what I need this Christmas of 2015. It is what you need this Christmas of 2015. And, it is what the nation needs this Christmas of 2015.

So, this Christmas, we will come once again, each of us just as we are, even unto Bethlehem and see this thing which is come to pass. Those of us who have much faith and those who would like to have more; those who have been here often and those who have not been here for a long time; those who have tried to follow Jesus and those who have failed. All of us, faithful, will Come. So, I invite you to:

Come, let us adore him,
Come, let us adore him,
Come, let us adore him,
Christ the Lord.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

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