

Rev. Gabriel Lawrence

Advent 4, Year A

December 21, 2025

St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, OH

Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25

One of my favorite sketches on the long-running comedy show Saturday Night Live is one where a main character called Debby Downer, played by comedic genius, Rachel Dratch, is out to eat with friends or on vacation with friends. And she has a knack for interrupting the jovial conversation of her friends with hard truths that seem to really bring down the conversation- at which time she breaks the fourth wall and looks at the camera with a frown so big it looks like the frown might just slide off of her face. And the sketch is always introduced with a little catchy jingle that goes, "'You're enjoying your day, everything's going your way, when along comes Debbie Downer. Always there to tell you 'bout a new disease, a car accident, or killer bees. You beg her to spare you, 'Debbie, please!' but you can't stop Debbie Downer!" Well, in this season of twinkling lights and sweet treats and festive music where we are perhaps feeling the joy of the season, I need to provide a disclaimer similar to Debby Downer's jingle. I want to apologize in advance for my sermon because today in this season of joy and expectation, I want to talk... about... fear.

It is perhaps one of the most common feelings or emotions that we feel as human beings. It drives us toward things or away from things. It influences our decisions as individuals, it can be used to control or manipulate, and it is rooted deeply in our primal instincts toward survival. And so, it is no wonder that the phrase that shows up in Scripture more than any other across the thousands of years recorded in over 60 books of the Bible is some variation of the phrase: "Do not be afraid". And we hear that phrase this morning in the early part of Matthew's birth narrative. We hear that Joseph was fearful. The person to whom he was engaged to be married was pregnant. In first century Palestine, this would have been a major cultural taboo. We're told Joseph was a righteous man, and so perhaps he was worried about what this might mean for his reputation. In a culture where shame and honor were the main currency, this news getting out could have not only ruined Mary's life but also his. And so, an angel comes to Joseph in a dream and greets him with the words, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid." And we know that an angel appeared to Mary and spoke the same words of comfort to her, too, when she learned that God had called her to bear love into the world.

I don't think it's any accident that before the silent nights and the joys to the world, on this fourth Sunday of Advent, we get the call story of Joseph. We get fear. We get an angel appearing in a dream. We get news that Mary will house the savior of the world in her womb for a time and then give birth to Emmanuel- God-with-us. And if we're careful to truly sit with this Advent story on the threshold of Christmas, we can grasp something deeply true about God, about this faith journey we are on, and about God's coming into the world that we will celebrate in just four day's time.

First, God calls us to do big things. This Christian journey is not passive. It is often not easy. At times, it asks much of us. It asks that, like Mary and Joseph, we give up certainty in order to open ourselves to vulnerability. It asks that we trade what we think we know so that we can make room in our hearts for the Spirit's work, which is always about surprising us with God in the unknown and unexpected. It asks that we take risks for the sake of the Gospel. It asks that we find God not just in beautiful sacred edifices like this one, but that we also find God in the face and heart of the stranger.

And if we're honest with ourselves, we might admit that engaging with our faith in these deep ways can strike fear into our hearts. There is usually no comfort in risk and vulnerability and sacrifice and the unknown. But here's the preview of Christmas that we get today: God shows up into our broken world and meets us in the risk and vulnerability and sacrifice and the unknown and says to us "Do not be afraid". God has always been with us, but in Christmas, God joins us as fellow traveler. God becomes one of us and dines with us and laughs with us and cries with us and speaks gently to us when we need a reminder: "Do not be afraid".

Though I am with you here at St. Paul's for another two weeks, because of how the preaching schedule works out, this is my last sermon. And while I was going to take a few moments before the sermon to reflect on my time serving with y'all here, it felt even more appropriate to do this in light of the Gospel text today within my sermon. I don't think any of us could have predicted all that the last two years have contained for us here at St. Paul's. If we could, we might have asked for an angel to appear back then to give us the gentle reminder "Do not be afraid". We've been through quite a bit during these two years, and especially a lot of transition. I don't have to tell you that. And yet, even without an angelic vision admonishing that we not be afraid, I have watched this faith community come together and carry on the work of building up God's Kingdom. In times of uncertainty, I have watched you embrace the Spirit's presence among you to continue being the Church, to continue living out the Gospel in this broken world that needs so badly to hear the words "Do not be afraid". You have shown me again and again what it is like to live into this Divine calling. And you have reminded me in ways too many to count the same thing that we learn at Christmas: the antidote to fear is love. In the face of vulnerability and risk and uncertainty, love drives out fear. Into a broken world full of fear, love itself was born in the Christ child. And even the darkest darkness could not overcome the light of that love.

And so the work continues. We continue building up the Kingdom of God. We continue offering to the world God's love which casts out all fear. We continue listening for where the Spirit might be calling us to widen our embrace and deepen the seats of our hearts so that we might make room for eternal love born to us at Christmas. May it be so. Amen.