

“Fear Not!”

By Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

12-24-18 Christmas Eve

Based upon Luke 2:10-11 (KJV)

It all started after church the Sunday before Thanksgiving. Samuel Lewis came running up to his mother at coffee hour bursting with good news: “Hey Mom, guess what?” he said. “I’m gonna be an angel!”

“Honey that’s wonderful!” Jane Lewis said, as she gave her 6-year old son a hug. A few minutes later, Michelle, the director of the church’s children’s program joined them.

“You’ve heard the news by now, I assume?” she asked Jane.

“Yes, I hear that we have an angel on our hands. But what exactly does that involve?”

“Not too much. We’ve already got all the costumes we need. You’ve just got to make sure that Sammy knows his one line.”

“Oh my! He’s got a line? Are you sure he’s ready? You know he’s not that old, and not always perfectly reliable in terms of his behavior.”

“Sammy says he can do it,” Michelle responded. “Here’s the script. His line is highlighted.”

That night after dinner, Jane pulled Sammy into her lap and said, “You know, in order to be an angel in this year’s pageant you have to learn how to say a line loud and clear so everyone in the congregation can hear you and know that you are an angel of God?”

“Yes,” Sammy said.

“Do you know your line?”

“No. I forget.”

“OK. Your line is: ‘Fear not, for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be for all people.’ Then it says here that your friend Wendy will say, ‘For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.’ Why don’t you give your line a try? Repeat after me: ‘Fear not!’”

“Fear not!” Sammy shouted, jumping off his mother’s lap and all around the kitchen. “Fear not! Fear not! Fear not!”

“OK that’s good, but there’s more. Next you say: ‘For behold I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be for all people.’”

“For I bring great tidings and good joy for all people.”

“Close enough for now. You need to practice a lot to make sure you get the line in your head before the pageant.”

“OK.”

That same evening Sammy’s big sister, Katie, was sitting at her desk in her room, staring at college applications. She knew she could get into State and might even then be able to commute from home if she did. But after she and her father had visited his alma mater, Cornell, earlier in the Fall, he had been pushing her to apply there. “You’re really talented, honey,” he kept saying. “You could be a great architect someday. But you need to work for it. Always pursue excellence, not mediocrity. Cornell is ranked No. 1 for its architecture program. Go for No. 1.”

The idea both excited and terrified her. Cornell was her dream school in terms of programming, but she had never been away from home for more than a weekend. She didn't know anyone in Ithaca or even near it, and it would be too far away to come home regularly. On top of all of that, she might not even get in, and even if she did, what if she didn't do well because it was too hard? Then what would her father think of her? Maybe she should just stick with the familiar. It would be less exciting, but it would be far less scary too.

Lost in her own thoughts, and wearing ear buds as always, she didn't hear Sammy come up the stairs and into her room. "Fear not!" Sammy shouted gleefully right behind her head.

"Geez, Sammy!" Katie said as she jumped in her chair. "You nearly gave me a heart attack. Don't do that!"

"I've got good news!" Sammy said.

"Oh yea, what's that?"

"I'm an angel, and I'm here to tell you about great joy for all people. It's about a baby called Jesus, but I can't tell you that part because Wendy's supposed to. Fear not!"

"What? Oh right, the church play. I told you congratulations this morning, remember? Now leave me alone; I have more important things to think about."

Sammy left Katie's room and wandered down the hall. Standing in the doorway of his 15-year-old brother Steve's room, he saw him posing in front of the mirror and talking to himself. *[Timid voice]:* "Linda," his brother said, "I was wondering..." *[Clears throat. Then adopts very cheerful, formal voice.]* "Hi Linda, it's me Steve, from your calculus class." *Oh God no that's awful. [Adopts suave, nonchalant voice.]* "Hey Linda, how's it going?"

"Fear not!" Sammy shouted as he burst into the room.

"Dude! Get out of here!" Steve shouted back, embarrassed.

"What are you doing?" Sammy asked.

"None of your business!"

"Who's Linda?"

"None of your business!"

"I've got good news."

"I don't care."

"But I'm an angel of God."

"Yea, says who?"

"The Bible. Fear not!"

"Get out!"

"Good news?"

"Get out!"

"It's for everyone!"

"Go away!" Steve shouted, pushing Sammy out of his room and slamming the door.

Downstairs Sammy's father, Mike, was in the study looking at a stack of bills. The previous month his car had needed a \$3,000 engine repair. It was clear he wasn't going to be able to keep it much longer, now that it was becoming a major money pit. But to get another car so close to the time Katie was heading off to college? How was he supposed to cover that? Steve's

braces still needed to be paid off, and then soon he'd be heading off for college too. The property taxes kept going up; the fridge was on the fritz. He had wanted Jane to stay home after Sammy surprised them by coming into their life. But trying to cover all their expenses on his salary alone was getting harder and harder. He wanted Katie to go to the best school for her, not just the cheapest. He wanted to take care of everything for everyone. He just couldn't figure out how he was going to do that, and he was afraid that he would be letting Jane down if he asked her to go back to work. "Hi Daddy!" Sammy said, wandering into the room.

"Hi little buddy. How are you doing?"

"I've got a message for you."

"Oh yea? A message from Mommy?"

"No, from God."

"Oh well then, I better pay attention. What did God tell you to tell me?"

"Feeeeeeaarrrr not!" Sammy shouted, bursting into laughter and running out of the room.

"What did you say?" Mike asked, blanching as if he'd seen a ghost.

Following Sammy out of his study and back to the kitchen, Mike watched Sammy climb back into his mother's lap. "What was all that about?" he asked.

"Oh, that's right, you were at soccer with Steve this morning, so you haven't heard. Sammy was given a role in the church Christmas pageant," Jane said.

"Is that right? Good for you Sammy. Keep up the good work. Did your teacher explain the story to you? The good news you are announcing was that God was going to come into the world to be with the people."

"In baby Jesus?"

"Yes. He came to the people in the midst of their struggles to give them hope and help. He came to save them from themselves and their fears, to tell them how much God loved them and that he was always going to take care of them. Do you understand? Do you have any questions about that?"

"Yea," said Sammy. "Can I have a cookie?"

A week later, Sammy went with his mother to his grandmother's house. She lived in a big old house an hour and a half away from them. The house had lots of rooms, including one which still had some of his mother's old toys in it. There were also lots of pictures on the walls of his grandfather, whom Sammy had never met because he died right before Sammy was born. Sammy was named after him. The house smelled like peppermint and perfume and age. When they walked into the house, Sammy found that the coffee table in the living room was covered with photo albums. "Come here, Sammy," said his Nana, who had trouble walking and was sitting on the couch. "You want to see what your mama looked like when she was little?"

"Have you been looking at the old albums again, Mom?" Jane asked.

"Yes. So many wonderful memories were made in this house! Do you remember that Christmas of the big snow when we built a fort and put Christmas lights in it? Do you remember when your father planted that magnolia tree in the back yard? Look how big it is now!"

"Yes, Mom. This place is filled with great memories. No one will ever forget it. But you will make new memories at Gillcrest, and it will be so nice having you closer to us. So, try to be positive. Did I tell you that Sammy is going to be in the pageant this year? We'll come get you,

so you can be there to see it. Sammy even has a line. Do you want to tell Nana what it is?" Sammy shook his head, caught up looking at pictures.

"Do you remember it?" Jane persisted, starting to mouth the words to him. Sammy looked at her disdainfully. Then putting down an album, and waving off her help, he walked over to his grandmother and whispered in her ear, "Fear not Nana. There's a baby coming who's really God. He's coming to help."

As the weeks of Advent passed, Jane was busy doing all of the things one does to get ready to celebrate Christmas. She decorated the house inside and out. She planned all the special meals. She bought and wrapped presents. Taking a break one afternoon for a cup of tea and some Christmas music while cookies were in the oven, Jane decided to read her friend's Christmas letter, which had arrived a few days before. Most of her friends just posted holiday greetings on Facebook and Instagram now, instead of sending cards. But her friend Nancy always sent a detailed letter about her life. Both of them had been in nursing school together. Around the time Jane had Sammy and decided to stop working, Nancy had decided to join Doctors Without Borders. So, reading her letters from places around the world always felt bittersweet because they always read a bit like the road-not-taken to Jane. She loved getting to watch Sammy grow. But now that he was in kindergarten, Steve was constantly off with his friends, and Katie was soon going to be leaving, she found herself feeling a little antsy at home by herself so much of the time. Nancy was helping so many people. It made Jane miss her old job. But Mike was so stressed out lately that she was afraid that if she told him she changed her mind about work now that would make him feel even worse. Of course, going back to work now after six years off would be challenging, as would trying to figure out how to work and take care of the family at the same time. Still, "*It wouldn't be impossible...*" Jane thought, before the oven buzzer snapped her out of her thoughts and back into the kitchen, where the cookies were done.

When the day of the pageant arrived, everyone in the family was grateful. Sammy had been behaving like the "Fear not"-boogie man for weeks, and it was driving them all insane. "Fear nots" for breakfast. "Fear nots" for dinner. You couldn't even take a shower in peace. They all knew his line so well they were even starting to hear it in their dreams. So, they were surprised when that morning, Sammy refused to go to church. "I'm not doing it!" Sammy insisted as his mom tried to get him to put on the angel costume.

"But honey, you have worked so hard."

"No!"

"But you're a very important part of the story."

"Wendy can do it."

"But Nana is here to see you perform, and Steve is even skipping soccer to come."

"I don't care."

When Jane couldn't get him to listen or behave, Katie said, "Mom, let me give it a try." Sammy was in his room, holding a stuffed bear and staring at the wall.

"Hey Sam-I-am, I hear you don't want to do the play."

"I'm not going."

"Why?"

“I just don’t want to.”

“Are you scared?”

“No.”

“Because I know what it’s like to feel scared.”

“What are you scared of?”

“Well, I’ve been a little scared about going away to college.”

“Why? Is college scary?”

“No. Well maybe a little bit. But you know what? You reminded me of something this month with all your ‘Fear nots!’. Sometimes the most wonderful things are a little bit scary at first. Then they turn out great.”

Sammy looked at her for a minute thoughtfully. Then he said, “I’m still not going.”

Walking by the room Steve ducked his head in and said, “Any luck?”

“No,” Katie said.

“Dude,” he said, walking into the room. “You’ve got to go.”

“I’m not going.”

“He’s scared,” Katie said.

“No, I’m not!” Sammy replied.

“Dude, what’s the worst that could happen to you? It’s a church play! Everyone loves you there.”

“I just don’t want to.”

“Look Sammy, you’ve got to do it. You’re the one with the good news about God’s love. Remember? It doesn’t matter if you’re perfect or not. People will love you anyway because everybody wants to hear that they are loved. They need to hear that. Trust me.”

Dragging his feet and his halo behind him, Sammy reluctantly went downstairs with his siblings. His Dad looked at him. “Ready Sam?”

“No.”

“It’s going to be OK. Remember what the play is about. God came into the world in baby Jesus so that we don’t have to feel scared that we are all alone. God came so that we would know that we are loved. God came so that he could help us when we’re afraid. God will be with you and we will too. We’re all rooting for you. You can do this.”

In the car, Nana, who was sitting next to Sammy, leaned over to him. “You want to know a secret?” she said.

“What?” said Sammy.

“I get scared sometimes too.”

“But you’re old!”

“Yes, but even when you’re old you can still be afraid of new experiences. I was. But then a wise young friend of mine told me something that made me feel better and more courageous. Do you want to hear it?”

“Yes” Sammy said.

Nana leaned close and whispered in his ear, “Fear not! Because the baby is really God. And that means even though what you’re about to do is new, you’re gonna be OK.”

At the church, the sanctuary was crowded and chaotic. After dropping Sammy off in the Sunday school class room, the Lewis' settled in the front row. Waiting for the play to begin, Jane leaned over and whispered to Mike, "Honey, if we can find some time after all this is over, I want to talk to you about the idea of me going back to work."

"Really, are you sure?" Mike asked in surprise.

"Yea. Maybe part-time at first, but I would like that."

"What about Sammy?"

"I think he'll be OK."

Then the lights dimmed, and a spotlight shown on a cardboard stable where the communion table usually was. The narrator told the familiar story about a holy promise fulfilled by a babe born into a poor family, which lived in a world filled with troubles. Then the spotlight moved to the side of the chancel, where two and three-year old sheep grazed enthusiastically among clearly inexperienced shepherds. Out among them stepped Sammy and Wendy as the heavenly host. Sammy looked at his family and smiled. "Fear not!" he said. "For I've got good news and great joy for all people." Then he looked at Wendy, who was staring at the congregation with abject terror in her eyes. Thirty seconds past, then a minute. Silence. Then Sammy leaned over and said, "That's OK Wendy. Today baby Jesus was born for us. You don't need to be afraid."

After the performance everyone celebrated in fellowship hall with red punch and Christmas cookies. Sammy was running around the room with a cookie in each hand like the weight of the world had been lifted from his shoulders. Nana was offering Katie some of her furniture to take to college. Jane and Mike were talking about how to share their parenting and financial responsibilities better, and Steve was killing time by staring at old confirmation class photos on the wall. Suddenly a young girl with long dark hair walked up to him. "Hey Steve, um, hi. I didn't know you went here. We have calculus together. I'm Linda."

May the good news the angels proclaimed be written on our minds and hearts tonight and always. "Fear not!" Amen.