

Christmas I – 2025, Lessons and Carols

Merry Christmas, friends! I remember when I was younger always feeling a little sad on Christmas night. I'd spent so long looking forward to this one day, and, as always seems to be the case with things we look forward to intensely, the day would come and go so quickly, here and then over in second. So I have always appreciated our tradition of celebrating the season of Christmas for a full twelve days, until the 6th of January when we observe the Epiphany. I love having just one or two more Sundays to hear the story of Jesus' birth, to sing some of my favorite songs in the hymnal, and to celebrate the miraculous way that God has chosen to come and be among us.

One of the things I've always found striking about the Christmas story is the number of times we are told not to be afraid. When the angel appears to Zechariah and tells him that he and his wife, Elizabeth, will have a child, though they are well past the traditional child-bearing age, the first thing the angel says to him is not to be afraid. When Mary learns that she will give birth to Jesus, the Messiah, the angel greets her in the same way as Zechariah. Do not be afraid, Mary, he tells her. And when the shepherds are called from their quiet fields to come and be the first people to see the newly born Savior of the world, they are called with the same words as Zechariah and Mary: do not be afraid. Again and again in the story of the birth of Jesus, we hear the same thing: something wonderful and amazing and new is taking place; do not be afraid, but rejoice.

John's Gospel, which we also hear this morning, begins a little differently than Matthew and Luke, with their birth narratives. But John still seeks to prepare us for the ministry of Jesus, who was and is and always will be. In this opening section of John's Gospel, we hear one of my

favorite verses of scripture: a light shines in the darkness, and did not overcome it. In acknowledging Jesus, the light of the world, we must also acknowledge our world can be quite dark. The reality is that we do experience grief and suffering, loss and death. We do make mistakes and hurt ourselves and the people around us. Need is very real. Pain is very real. Loss is very real.

It is into that reality that God chooses to fully enter. God does not stay far away, observing our world from on high, dispassionate and unmoved. Instead, God chooses to become incarnate, to become one of us and be with us fully. In doing so, God experiences all the things we go through, our highs, our lows, our best and our worst, and every single thing in between.

We're told, repeatedly in the Christmas story not to be afraid. The light of the world, Jesus Christ the Messiah, is finally here. No dark thing in this world or in all of creation can dim the light of Jesus. No dark thing in all creation can diminish God's love for us. No dark thing in all creation can stop God from going from heaven to earth to hell and back again to redeem us, save us, and bring us home.

This is the good news of the incarnation: God has come to be with us and has not ever left us to face any of the things we go through alone. The Good News of Jesus, the Emmanuel, is that God is with us, the light of the world, but also the light of our lives, sharing with us in our best moments and consoling us in our worst, choosing, again and again to draw near, to draw us so very close. Do not be afraid, Zechariah and Mary and the shepherds are told. Do not be afraid, said also to us in our own day. Jesus, the light of the world, has come. And the darkness cannot and will not ever overcome him.