

**“Our Better Angels”**  
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**Text: Luke 2:8-14**  
**Myers Park Presbyterian Church**  
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*In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup>Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup>But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: <sup>11</sup>to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah,<sup>\*</sup> the Lord. <sup>12</sup>This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.’ <sup>13</sup>And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,*

<sup>14</sup> *‘Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!’*

*When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.’ <sup>16</sup>So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup>When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; <sup>18</sup>and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.*

“We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory...will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.”<sup>1</sup> These words come from Abraham Lincoln’s first inaugural address in 1861. They are quoted at the beginning of Jon Meacham’s new book, *The Soul of America: The Battle for Our Better Angels*. If you ever find yourself saying, “Things have never been this bad,” then this is the book for you. Though it is not without political bias, I found the book to be a fascinating survey of various times in our nation’s history when we have been severely polarized politically and how the nation got through those times without falling apart. Meacham reminds readers of political tensions in the 1780’s around the Constitutional Congress; of the Civil War and its aftermath, of the Great Depression, the Red Scare of the 1950’s, and of the incredible social turbulence of the 1960’s. There is comfort in realizing that actually there are many chapters in our nation’s history that have been at least as challenging as the present polarizations we face, and some of them were far worse. Something about that tempers my fears. That’s a good thing. These days our fears surely need careful examination.

Our nation’s history is filled with a lot of fear. In some ways fear has been a constant in our society. It was there on October 7, 1948 when a crowd of over 1,000 in Cabell Hall at the University of Virginia listened to a Southern governor proclaim that a certain policy proposal “would undermine the American way of life and outrage the Bill of Rights.” He went on to say that he and his political allies offered “the only genuine obstacle to the rise of socialism or communism in America,” and that they alone were the only ones with “the moral courage to stand up to the Communists and tell them this foreign doctrine will not work in free America.”<sup>2</sup> That governor was Strom Thurmond. He was rallying constituents in the wake of the Democratic Party’s nomination of Harry Truman, who endorsed a civil rights program

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<sup>1</sup> From Abraham Lincoln’s first inaugural address, as quoted in John Meacham’s, *The Soul of America: The Battle for Our Better Angels*, (Random House: New York, 2018,) p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> As quoted by Meacham in *The Soul of America*, p 4.

that included anti-lynching legislation and protections against racial discrimination in hiring. Thurmond formed a breakaway group within the Democratic Party formally known as, “The States Rights Democratic Party,” better known as “The Dixiecrats.” Needless to say, the Dixiecrats did not prevail. Thurmond got about 2% of the popular vote. Truman defeated Dewey in a very narrow national election, and the nation did not become communist. Yet fear fueled enough fire for Thurmond to win Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, and his home state of South Carolina. He won 39 electoral votes in the 1948 election.

Meacham writes: “Fear...has been with us always. Understood...as an anticipation of danger to oneself or to a group to which one belongs—including economic, racial, ethnic, religious, or other identity groups—it is among the oldest of human forces...In the most elemental of terms, masters of (the politics of fear) are adept at the manufacturing or, if fear already exists, the marshaling of it at the expense of those who one believes pose a threat to one’s own security.”<sup>3</sup> Quoting Edmund Burke, Meacham concludes, “No passion...so effectively robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear.”<sup>4</sup>

Fear certainly defined the Roman province of Judea in the first century. The *Pax Romana*, or “Roman Peace,” defined the time. Caesar Augustus, of Luke 2 v. 1 fame, is regarded as the founder of the *Pax Romana*. While there was certainly an absence of war, if you were among the conquered people, this peace did not feel very peaceful. There was peace as long as you did what the Romans told you to do. There was peace, but it was produced by the pressure of the Roman thumb upon their Empire. So when Caesar decided it was time to count his subjects, to register them so that they could become “tax paying” contributors to the Empire, Joseph and Mary had to travel to Bethlehem, even though Mary was nine-months pregnant. This was the *Pax Romana* for the people of Judea. The foundation of that peace was fear.

King Herod the Great of Judea was the Roman puppet who enforced the peace with a heavy hand. Secular historians report he had a bodyguard of 2,000 soldiers to protect him from the contempt people had towards him—talk about fear. Herod was guilty of many brutal acts including the killing of his wife, his brother-in-law, three of his sons, at least 300 military leaders, and many others. Matthew’s gospel describes his decision to slay every child in and around Bethlehem two years old or younger in an attempt to eliminate the new born king he learned about from the wise men. That story doesn’t make our Christmas pageants, but it is the first response by the powers of the world to the coming of the Christ-child. Herod was a master of the politics of fear.

This is the world into which Christ was born. This is the world in which the shepherds of Luke’s gospel lived; a world defined by fear. These shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night are among the least of these in their world. On a pilgrimage to the Holy Land I had the opportunity to go out to one of the traditional sights of the Shepherd’s Field outside Bethlehem. We sat in a cave where Christians have worshipped since the 5th century and sang “Angels We Have Heard on High.” But Shepherd’s lives were certainly not filled with many glorias.

There is scholarly debate about the shepherd’s place in society. Some argue that they were despised, dishonest, and unclean according to the standards of the law. The Greek Philosopher, Aristotle didn’t think much of shepherds describing them as, “the laziest ... who lead an idle life, and get their

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<sup>3</sup> Meacham, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

subsistence without trouble from tame animals.”<sup>5</sup> Others argue that sources naming shepherds as despised are far removed from first century Judea. They were just poor, humble laborers. Regardless, as the bottom of the socio-economic ladder of their day, shepherds knew hardship. They lived in poverty. They lived in the fields with their sheep, sheltering in caves like the one I sang in. They faced regular threat, be it from the economic realities of poverty, or predators seeking their livestock, or Roman soldiers deciding they wanted some mutton for supper. Fear no doubt defined their lives. As if there wasn’t enough to fear in their world, that first Christmas the shepherds’ fields are invaded by a host of other-worldly angels. An angel of the Lord stands before them and the glory of the Lord shines ‘round them, and as the King James Bible puts it, “they were sore afraid.” Who wouldn’t be? Of course the angel says what angels always say in the Christmas story, what Gabriel said to Zechariah, what he said to Mary, what the angel said to Joseph in his dream: “Don’t be afraid.”

My friend, Tom Are said of this moment, “For the longest time, I just assumed they said that because angels were scary. Like seeing spiders or snakes, folks just get the willies when they see an angel. But I think they say this is because they know us, and they know we are always already afraid.” Tom is absolutely right. This is what we’ve been exploring throughout Advent. It’s what the great theologian Paul Tillich recognized about us. At every level of our existence, we are afraid.

As individuals, we long for life, but we face the reality of death, and so we are afraid. We long for relationships with others, but this requires us to be vulnerable, to open ourselves to another and risk the very real possibility of rejection, so we are afraid. In our societies, we long for community, but we face the harsh reality that at some point the interests of my community will come into conflict with the interests of your community, be it a neighborhood or a nation and so we glom together to protect ourselves from all the threats out there, and we find ourselves perpetually afraid.

Again, to quote Tom Are: “The angels know how fear erodes our better selves. We do things we wouldn’t do otherwise. When we are afraid, our neighbor looks like the enemy, and anyone who is different is deficient. When we are afraid, everyone is after us, no one can be trusted. ...When we are afraid, we are consumed by what we might lose and things like joy and forgiveness seem like fantasy.”<sup>6</sup>

Friends, the Christmas angels want better for us. They are our “better angels,” as Lincoln put it; and they want better for us. So does God. God knows fear erodes our best selves. God knows fear turns neighbors into enemies and trust into paranoia. God knows fear sows anxiety and anger. God knows fear prevents peace on earth and goodwill toward one another, so God does not want us to fear.

God wants us to hope; to hope in a young woman who is with child, even though the circumstances of her pregnancy are filled with fear. God wants us to hope; to hope enough in the Spirit’s work to trust one another, and take a chance with Joseph, and trust Mary, trust one another and move forward in faith. God wants us to hope in the good news of a baby born in a barn, a baby whose humble dwelling redefines glory, a baby who comes from a very special family, a family of shepherds, from David, the shepherd boy who became a king. Who could possibly fear a baby? God knows hope is the antidote to fear.

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<sup>5</sup> Cited in this article which outlines the history of people’s views of shepherds.

<https://factsandtrends.net/2015/12/17/christmas-urban-legends-shepherds-as-outcasts/>

<sup>6</sup> From Tom Are’s Christmas Sermon at Village Presbyterian Church, 2017.

In his book about the battle for our better angels, Jon Meacham puts it this way: “The opposite of fear is hope...Fear feeds anxiety and produces anger, hope...breeds optimism and feelings of well-being. Fear is about limits; hope is about growth. Fear casts its eyes warily, even shiftily, across the landscape; hope looks forward, toward the horizon. Fear points at others, assigning blame; hope points ahead, working for a common good. Fear pushes away; hope pulls others closer. Fear divides; hope unifies.”<sup>7</sup>

Beloved, God wants us to hope. In hope the shepherds go to the Bethlehem and see. In hope they go with haste, with joy and excitement about what the future may hold. In hope they share the good news they have heard with Mary and Joseph. In hope, these lowly shepherds become heaven’s heralds of glad tidings. In hope they overcome their fears to embrace the love of God embodied in this miraculous little baby who shows us nothing will be impossible with God.

Our world gives us so much to fear—and not without cause in some instances. Markets fear a looming recession and a government shut down; the military fears a Syria left to despots; liberals fear fascism, conservatives fear socialism; parents fear for their children’s futures, children fear their parent’s expectations. In the midst of a world too often defined by fear, may we listen to the voices of our better angels, the better angels we have heard throughout this Advent season. What do they tell us? “Fear not. Fear not, your neighbors are not your enemies. Fear not; stand in faith and embrace the hope of God’s tomorrow. Fear not; the Lord is with you. Fear not, God is working in your midst. Fear not, for soon and very soon unto us shall be born in the city of David a Savior, who is the Christ the Lord.

With the shepherds, let us go with haste to worship the King of kings, who leads in love with hope, rather than frightening us into submission. Let us love the Prince of Peace and follow in his footsteps bringing good news to the poor, release to the captives, and recovery of sight to those who have lost God’s vision for the world’s tomorrows. Let us serve the Lord of lords whom we welcome in the least of these our brothers and sisters in God’s family. For then we will live into the hope proclaimed by the better angels of Christmas: Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward all people. May it be so! Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> Meacham, p. 16.