**Christmas Message**

A couple of nights before my very first Christmas as a Pastor I met with a group of colleagues for one of the seasons’ most treasured rituals. A yankee swap.

And of all the gifts that we turned up with, there one one that got stolen more than most. And I ended up with it.

It was a replica of the tree from the Charlie Brown Christmas Special. I single branch. Mounted on to pieces of wood. Bent nearly to the ground by the weight of a single red ornament.

The images, and especially the music, from that special have become standard features of this season. It’s melancholy and haunting melodies, and gentle but uplifting style somehow capture the truth of this season in such a unique and moving way.

This year marks the 50th Christmas since this beloved special first premiered. And it still has surprises in store. In examining the 25 minute long tape for a television special celebrating the 50th anniversary. Someone noticed a frame that passes so quickly, you could miss it…

Linus Van Pelt, Charlie Brown’s best friend, is standing on a darkened stage to share with everyone the true meaning of Christmas. He is reciting the words from the Gospel of Luke, which we heard just tonight.

Linus is known for one thing. His security blanket. It goes with him everywhere. And he is ridiculed for it.

But when he begins reading, "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 afraid. And the angel said unto them, 'Fear not…”

And the blanket falls to the floor. And Linus proceeds to tell the story of Christ’s birth, with his security blanket in a heap on the floor next to him.

Do not be afraid, for I bring you good news, of great joy, which shall be for all people, the angel proclaims. For a savior is born this night. God has come to live with us.

Let go of all that you cling to in fear. God is doing something new this night.

It is the great mystery that we celebrate this night, that the God who created all that is. The God who rests beyond our understanding, and who is not contained by our names, that God. God of all the Earth, came one day to live as one of us.

The God who has all power, came to Earth in something as vulnerable and fragile as an infant.

God came to live as one of us. To encounter the particular joys and the deep struggles of human life. To know the world as we know it. To love us up close. To set us free from fear.

Now there is no question that fear is in the headlines these days. And if the big news-worthy fears weren’t enough, we have those persistent fears in our own lives that never quite seem to quiet down.

Our fears make us hold on tightly to familiar things. They drive us into bad habits and bad decisions. Fear can overpower us. It can control us.

That’s why each and every angel that shows up in the Christmas Story, to Mary, to Joseph, and to the Shepherds, the first thing they say is “Do not be afraid.”

Do not be afraid to bear this child.

Do not be afraid to head toward Bethlehem, even if there may not be room in the inns.

Do not be afraid to walk away from the world you know, to seek God’s surprising interruption.

Do not be afraid to welcome the stranger. Do not be afraid to speak the truth. Do not be afraid to seek new life. Do not be afraid to go on a journey.

The life that God calls us to is a life beyond fear. A life where our actions are motivated by seeking the best future we can imagine rather than avoiding the worst.

The life God calls us to is one where we leave the familiar hillside to follow an angels call to an unexpected place.

God’s invitation to you, and to me, is for us to venture beyond what is comfortable, beyond what is familiar and safe, in order to encounter what is Holy and what is true.

After all, thats what God did for us.

God, who decided that the safety of distant omnipotence wasn't worth being apart from us.

God, who decided that not even the fear of birth in a barn, nor life with the poor, nor the pain of the world, nor even death, none of it, was too much to bear if it meant being with you.

God took became as helpless as an infant. As fragile as you and I. For one reason. To be near to us. To feel what we feel. To encounter human life first-hand. To merge God’s life with our own.

So God, who gave it all up, and took it all on, to come, this night, to live with us in our mess of the world, says: “Do not be afraid. I have good news. For you. For all people. Come and see.”

[walk down front for offering invitation]