

“Merry Christmas”

Luke 2:8-20

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To the world, Christmas is one day to celebrate before the Boxing Day sales. But in the church, Christmas is a twelve-day celebration, from Christmas Eve until Epiphany on January 6th. So, Merry Christmas!

Some time ago, I was wondering about the greeting, Merry Christmas. We don't usually use the word Merry except at Christmas time. And while we may sometimes hear Happy Christmas, it is normally the word Merry that is used. I wondered how and when did this happen, so like any good scholar, I Googled it! I learned that the first known usage of the greeting “Merry Christmas” was in an informal letter written by an English admiral in 1699. Much later, in 1843 it appeared in the first Christmas card produced in England and in the carol “We Wish You a Merry Christmas”. That same year, Charles Dickens used the relatively new term in his book, “A Christmas Carol”, which is credited for popularizing the greeting.

Now, the reason I became so interested in our popular Christmas greeting, is because I noticed another greeting recurring throughout the Christmas message of the scriptures. The Christmas story actually begins with the birth narrative of John the Baptist. His parents were a priest named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. They were both quite old and had never had any children. One day, Zechariah was chosen to offer incense in the temple of the Lord, while all the people outside were praying. An angel appeared to Zechariah, standing next to the altar of incense, and said to him, “**Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John.**” (Luke 1:13)

After many years, when it seemed most unlikely, Zechariah's and Elizabeth's prayers were going to be answered. They were to become parents.

Six months later, the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, telling her, "**Do not be afraid** Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High." (Luke 1:30-32) This was even more astounding than Zechariah's message – for Mary was young and unmarried. And, unlike Zechariah who was a priest and Elizabeth who was a descendent of Aaron, Moses' brother and the first priest, Mary was nobody remarkable. But, Mary trusted and accepted the responsibility given her.

Unfortunately, Mary's fiancé did not believe her and planned to divorce her. But then an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream saying, "**Do not be afraid** to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." (Matthew 1:20-21)

This was a difficult thing for Joseph – by marrying Mary, who was pregnant before they were married, they would be looked at disparagingly by their neighbours. Some people might believe that the child was conceived by the Holy Spirit, but many would not. Joseph was being asked to raise a son who was not his own – the son of the Most High – what a daunting task. Yet, as soon as he awoke from his dream, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him.

On the night that this baby, Jesus, was born, an angel of the Lord appeared to some lowly shepherds outside of Bethlehem, saying, "**Do not be afraid**; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord." (Luke 2:10-11)

The greatest news of all – the birth of the long-awaited Saviour! Born in Bethlehem and announced to poor and humble shepherds! In the Christmas message, there are four instances of an angel of the Lord appearing, and each time the greeting is the same: **“Do not be afraid!”**

That message from God is the same for us today. Perhaps you are like Zechariah and Elizabeth. You have prayed and longed and hoped for something and received no answer. God may not answer our prayers when we want him to, or how we expect him to, but he hears our prayers and he answers them in his perfect timing and his own amazing way. **Do not be afraid – your prayer has been heard.**

Maybe you feel like Mary. She was a poor young woman from a little village called Nazareth. To most people she was no one special, but the angel Gabriel, the angel of the Lord, called her “favoured one” and told her that the Lord was with her. You may not feel very special – people may have told you that you will never amount to much, but the message of Christmas is for you too. **Do not be afraid – for you have found favour with God.**

Some people may feel like Joseph. You may be facing a difficult task – something you would rather run from. People are watching how you will react to the situation you are in – whether or not you will arise to the occasion. This could be your greatest moment – or your worst disaster. **Do not be afraid – God is working in the midst of whatever you are facing – he will be with you and will see you through.**

No matter what situation you are in or who in the Christmas story you relate to, the greatest message of all is for everyone. At the birth of his son, Jesus, God sent his angel to some lowly shepherds – not kings or priests – not the wealthy or scholarly – but poor humble shepherds. This was his way of letting the world know that the good news is for everyone.

God loves each one of us so much that he sent his son to live among us.
As we face a new year full of wonders and unknowns, the message for us all
is: **Do not be afraid – for today is born for you a Saviour, Christ the Lord.
God with us.**