

*In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3All went to their own towns to be registered. 4Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. 5He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*

*8In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." 13And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 14"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" 15When 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." 16So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*

No need to be afraid this night.

No need to be afraid.

"Do not be afraid Mary," the angel Gabriel said when he first appeared to her. "You will conceive in your womb and bear a Son and you will name him Jesus."

"Do not be afraid Mary. God is at work here."

Then nine months later the darkness of night became bright with the glory of God. An angel appeared to shepherds. "Do not be afraid."

Between those angel visits came that moment when Joseph learned that Mary was pregnant. He decided to divorce her quietly for he knew the child was not his own. Surely this was the time for Mary to be frightened.

But no, just as he was ready to do this, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream, telling him that the child to be born was God's own Son. Joseph believed, cared for Mary.

God is at work here.

Then came news that they must travel, from their home in Nazareth to Bethlehem to be enrolled in the census. It could not have come at a worse time. And when they arrived no room for them in the inn, there was no warm safe place for Mary to give birth to her son.

But there was a manger there in which the child would sleep.

Mary and Joseph had no family there in Bethlehem to help with the delivery, no mother and father, sister or brother, cousins, friends to share their joy over the child's birth. Still no need to be afraid, God is at work here.

And soon it was that shepherds arrived, became family for them that night. Sent by God through the angels, they told of the angel's message, and song.

Do not be afraid, God is at work here.

That night was only the beginning. Mary's son, God's son, would walk the roads his Father had planned for him. He would be God's love for the sick, God's forgiveness for sinners, God's word to the misguided and confused. Yet always just over the horizon a storm was brewing.

Then one day those dark clouds of conflict, suffering and death arrived. Isn't now the time for Mary to be afraid for her son, God's Son, afraid for us all?

Jesus died an awful death. And Mary was still alive. Was God's word through the angel an empty word, that invitation to faith, "Do not be afraid"? Her beloved Son was dead.

Very early on the day after the Sabbath women went to the tomb. An angel greeted them there. Matthew tells us the angel spoke first spoke these words: "Do not be afraid." Then the angel told of Jesus alive.

See, no need to be afraid this night nor any night. God is at work. Imagine all the worst things that could happen - being alone, suffering, watching those you love suffer, die. And know that even if they do happen, God will still be at work, and will have the final word. And that word is Jesus, victorious over all that could harm you, even death.

Never be afraid again. Believe in Jesus, born of Mary, crucified by Pilate, raised by God.

Believe in Jesus for this child of Mary is your Lord.

The word angel means messenger. Tonight I bring that same message to you: Do not be afraid.