My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

In the passages just prior to our scripture today, the archangel Gabriel—you know about Gabriel, right? No? Well, Gabriel is a messenger of God, an archangel—wait a minute, you know about archangels, right? No? OK, before we go any further, let’s discuss.

Archangels are not guardian angels. There’s lots of Guardian angels. Guardian angels are tasked to keep us safe, and be our energetic eyes and ears—they are really popular these days and with younger folks, because they are all about you, and you, and you (pointing around the congregation). We love it when our egos are fed knowing the world is set up just for us, right? Sure.

There’s only a few Archangels, and they serve a much broader purpose. They are the Managers and Overseers of the Guardians, making sure that everyone is fulfilling their assignments well. Not only do they have a bird’s eye view of our lives, seeing the depth and scope of our human struggles from above but they see the big picture for all of us, and know-how to orchestrate and maneuver to make our manifestations happen for the highest and best of all involved. And Archangel Gabriel is the angel protector of Israel against the archangels of the other nations, and also the principle messenger of God to God’s people. So this matters.

Because when THE archangel appears in a little town and says “Greetings highly favored one! The Lord is with you”, this is a little shocking. The Bible tells us that Mary was “greatly troubled” at these words, even wondering what kind of a greeting this was. I think we can all agree that having an ARCHANGEL appear would rattle us up a little bit. But then he says, “Be not afraid”.

Oh, well, alright then. Sure.

Mary accepts God’s purpose for her, and especially our Catholic brothers and sisters focus on Mary’s faithful consent of “may it be to me as your have said.” But I don’t know that we fully appreciate that Mary was still trying to take all of this in, and as an unwed pregnant teen, it seems to me that she saw danger in staying in Nazareth. Do you know what happens to unwed teen mothers in ancient times? They are stoned to death at the entrance to her father’s house. Mary has nothing but a story of an angel to tell her mom and dad, and her betrothed, Joseph, who knew he didn’t get her pregnant. He would have been well within his rights to report her to the authorities and watch her be killed. This is Taliban-like brutality, isn’t it? So from my point of view—this is just me—I think if I were in Mary’s shoes I’d have fled for a distant cousin’s house, too.

Her flight to the hill country and Elizabeth’s house is, for my two cents, a demonstration of the very-real fight or flight response we have when faced with danger. In an ancient society that based itself on religious dogma, if we read Deuteronomy 22, we too might flee for the hills.

Be Not Afraid.

But how do we know which promises of God will be fulfilled, and what circumstances are beyond the control of both the archangels and our guardian angels? What if we were forced from our homes based on something we never intended, just like Mary never intended her pregnancy? What if we had to flee our homes based on our religion? What if we had to flee our families based on our racial background? What if we had to flee all that we knew because others threatened us and our children with death unless we did their bidding? We would be very afraid, feeling very alone, wondering where our angels were and what might be happening here on earth.

Be not afraid indeed.

If we can empathize and feel that desperation, that is the fear that is driving so many from their countries of origin to some other place—any other place—because it’s no longer safe at home. Folks who don’t want to die are not dangerous. They’re like us. Except we have forgotten our deep emotions, that are also theirs, and in doing so we have forgotten our common humanity.

And every Christmas, we’re confronted with it again, and we dismiss it again, because Mary is not afraid.

The irony, as my friend Austin Shelley says, is that we should be afraid of Jesus, too. The one who hangs out with all the wrong sorts. You know the wrong sort. The ones who have diseases that could kill us. The ones to whom we have attached the Scarlet Letter to, no matter how long ago their actions. The ones who don’t speak our language and need our help to get basic needs met. The ones who haven’t showered because there are no public showers here in Greenland for those who live in tents in the forest.

Jesus loved these people, and for that reason, we should really be afraid of him. Because following him involves taking risks to love others more deeply, seeing others through THEIR eyes, just as he did. When Jesus encountered people we exclude, he took action, restoring them to health and participation in the life of the community.

There’s a fight-or flight instinct in us all. But let’s not get all gooey-eyed at Mary’s Magnificat. That happens only after she’s safely hidden, for the moment, until she can figure out that she won’t be killed. If those who would seek to kill her knew what her son would do when he grew up, you bet they’d kill him too.

But we are told to trust in God, and be not afraid.

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

All of us here are darn lucky we won the ovarian lottery and were born in America at his time in history. We have a pretty good go of it. And that’s what holds us back, what keeps us afraid. Afraid of risking our hearts, our homes, our money, our relationships to do the Jesus thing. To suffer as others suffer. To take in strangers who are just as afraid but for other reasons.

This is the Advent Sunday of Peace. I hope that when we get that initial fight or flight to tell us to hunker down that we can run to each other, just as Mary did with Elizabeth. That we have a covenant community that reminds us of our blessings. People right here, right now, that embolden us to face Jesus in the faces of others who have fled as well, through their lives and struggles.

We all struggle. We all have pain. But we all seek peace. We have to trust the archangels that all will be well. We have to figure out our guardian angels are near and here in amazing ways. And this Christmas, if we want the Peace of God, we have to find ways to say “I love you” to everyone. No exceptions. Not ever.

Only then might we be able to say, “May it be to me, as you have said”. And we can be fulfilled, and not afraid.

Thanks be to God, Amen.