

“There’s no good news left.” Those were my husband’s words just a couple of nights ago as he turned off the radio to go to bed. I believe the reporter was in the middle of a discussion of the Luca Magnotta trial – or maybe it was about Ebola or the terrorist attack on the school in Peshawar or sanctioned police violence or a missing Aboriginal woman. I don’t know if there has actually been more bad news these past months than in other years but it certainly feels like it. It’s easy to believe that there’s just no good news left.

And listening to the radio – which we do a lot – has been a particularly strange experience over the last week and a half or so. The newscasts are so...dire. So sad. And then the program will jump to a story about children’s favourite Christmas carols or the charming holiday traditions of Cape Breton or which wine to pair with which kind of sumptuous Christmas feast. So...sweet. So very, very...Merry. It’s like we’re trying to blind ourselves to the dark with twinkle lights.

The contrast is stark and the desperation of the news makes the merriness of the rest feel hollow, disingenuous, desperate itself. And no matter how many twinkly lights we use to decorate the world, it’s still a pretty dark place.

Last week, in a blog post I wrote for the Cathedral website, I suggested that a more appropriate seasonal greeting than “Merry Christmas” would be “Be not afraid.” Since I first thought of it, the idea has grown on me. It has biblical warrant, after all. Gabriel to Mary and to Joseph and to the shepherds - all greeted with "Do not be afraid".

And I don't think this was just because angels are frightening. I think it's because Mary and Joseph and the shepherds were already afraid, like many of us are much of the time.

Fear, after all, is part of the basic human condition - a perfectly understandable response to the fact that we exercise little to no control over our lives. This fact is more obvious in some circumstances than in others - when faced with serious illness; or with poverty; or with oppression; or violence; or the death of those we love. I can attest that it is obvious in pregnancy and in child birth - even more so for a socially questionable pregnancy and delivery in less than ideal circumstances. And I can imagine that it is also obvious late at night, guarding your livelihood against wild animals, on a hilltop in your occupied territory.

It is into this fear that God sent angels to bring words of reassurance: Do not be afraid.

It is into this fear that God sends God's son, to be the saviour of all who walk in darkness and to bring peace to all God's people.

As that son would one day say: "the well are in no need of a doctor". God is under no illusions about what we are. God's love for us is not the result of some great trick we've managed to play; some great con we've managed to pull off. God came to us in Jesus to be with us in the darkness and the fear; not because God thought it would be a barrel of laughs.

We're the ones who think we need to be happy and beautiful to be ready for the birth of Christ. We're the ones concerned about how clean our houses are or how perfect our gifts are or how festive our feast is. Not God. Jesus was born to an inappropriate family from an occupied people while on an arduous journey commanded by a foreign power. Mary gave birth far from home, without her mother or her sisters or her aunts around. Jesus' first bed was an animal feedbox. It was dirty and dark and probably smelly. All the romantic nativity scenes, all the adorable stories about stable mice or Christmas oxen don't change these basic facts.

That's what God was getting Godself into. Knowingly. Willingly. Lovingly.

And so the angels sing "Do not be afraid - see, I bring you good news of great joy for all the people."

But still. It's hard to not be afraid. It's easier to dress up and play at having a big happy party with cheery, cheesy music and turkey with all the trimmings and lots and lots of shopping. The danger is that all the twinkle lights can simply deepen the darkness and leave us even more afraid because we've refused to let God into our fear, preferring to fill up on pretend cheer.

To be fair, even if we wanted to, fear, does not just switch off when it's told to. But we don't have to let it control our choices; our perspectives; our imaginations. We can live with bravery even as we are still afraid.

At their best, this is what the twinkle lights and the music and the feasting are for - they say to the darkness that it does not have the final say; that our fear will not determine how we live for we have been given a greater light than any Christmas decoration - a light which shines into the most desperate of places so that we are able look more carefully and see more clearly and respond more faithfully.

At their best, they are the angels proclaiming good news to the shepherds on the hilltop and sending them off to Bethlehem to seek the Christ Child.

At their best, our Christmas celebrations enable us to remember that there is, all evidence to the contrary, still some very good news indeed.

"Do not be afraid - see, I bring 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. Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace among those whom he favours!"