There was a woman named Mary, and her fiancée was named Joseph. Mary was about to give birth, and as the story is told in Luke, they have traveled about 100 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem to register for the census. The town of Bethlehem is a bustling military town, so they head to the house of their relatives to spend the night. It’s late, Mary is exhausted and Joseph may feel a bit frantic in trying to get Mary settled. The best that can be done, is for them to stay in the bottom portion of their relative’s home, because the house is overflowing with family.

Joseph works hard to ready the space by washing the floor with bucket after bucket of water, but the odor of sheep and cow dung still wafts around them. He has done his best to prepare a space for Mary and him to sleep, but sleep does not come. Mary begins to move about on the straw telling Joseph the time is near to give birth, so Joseph runs upstairs to get help. He sits quietly in the corner of the small stable, and waits – waits for a son or daughter to be born. If the angels are correct, he will have a son. He hopes for a son, for he will be named Yeshu'a in the Hebrew language, Joshua in our English translation, and Jesus in the Arabic language.

The mind of Joseph begins to wander as he waits. He is filled with doubts and fears as he watches Mary struggle to give birth, but he waits quietly. Questions that need answers threaten to leave the lips of Joseph, but he knows Mary will repeat the same story of the angel Gabriel making a visit to her. And what about the dream he had of the angel coming to him affirming the same story Mary had told him. So many questions. No answers were given that night, only the grunting of Mary trying to give birth. He waits wondering if this baby is the offspring of some shepherd that Mary may have met, but something inside him tells him Mary has spoken the truth. The angel has spoken the truth.

“Why can’t I hang on to the feeling I had when I woke up from my dream,” Joseph questions. I felt so sure and confident, no one could have talked me out of believing what the angel had told me, that my son will be named Joshua, and he will be the son of the Most High. Why am I filled with doubts now? If God gives us love, why don’t I have the necessary courage to sustain my belief in God. Why isn’t God’s presence more permanent than what I am feeling right now?

Our narrative this morning may be hard to believe for some of you this morning. What is believable, is the doubts we carry inside ourselves about God. In your life time, you may have read or gotten the same questions hurled at you about God, as I did, such as, “If Jesus is alive, then where is he?” “If Jesus really did die and is now living with his father in heaven, why don’t I know more about how this took place?” There is plenty of scripture texts to answer these questions, but if you don’t believe the ancient texts, then it is impossible to provide credibility to support any reason to follow a baby boy born in Bethlehem or Jerusalem named Jesus. Both authors of the Gospels, Matthew and Mark, spend an inordinate number of words to show the holiness of Jesus, yet, it’s up to us on whether we believe these ancient texts.

Because the truth is, there is a more important question for us to examine: “How do you tell the story of Jesus?” Do you do it with words? Do your actions emulate the life of Jesus? The telling is probably done by both methods. God’s story did not stop with the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. It continued to shine all through the life of Jesus. The Gospels show him as a strong and uninhabited man who enjoyed his friends, most of whom were labeled ‘unclean’ or unacceptable. Jesus enjoyed his great gift of healing, he turned water into wine at a wedding and he enjoyed his faith, even when no one understood him or he was unable to make them understand why he was on earth.

I recall the big shout-out by the Angel Gabriel, “Fear not!” In the bible, “fear not” ends with an exclamation point. Sometimes words are so easy to write, but how does a person live through the words of “fear not”? Feeling afraid is a universal reaction to someone or something trying to threaten our wellbeing. Fear is an appropriate reaction to danger, and the Angel Gabriel understands this. That’s why the angel follows up his ‘fear not’ with, “I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people.” It’s almost like the angel is saying as quickly as possible, “Hey there, just wait a minute, I am here to give you good news and hope. Just take a slow, deep breath, and let me explain.”

Fear. Anxiety. These two words are probably spoken more often than any words we hear right now through the media and in the grocery store. At times it is difficult to know if certain threats are real or not, but the feeling of fear is real and can consume our lives. And, then, there are real threats, like the new strain of Covid, and it seems that once again we face the possibility of getting sick. Emotionally and culturally anxiety is at the root cause of so many parts of our life. Fear and anxiety are the root causes of racism, and our inability to listen to people we politically disagree with, so how can we cope with our feelings of anxiety? According to the Angel Gabriel, we trust in the good news of joy we find in knowing Jesus, God with us.

We begin to tell ourselves a different story than what the world around us is trying to tell us. We begin to find our hope in God, Jesus with us, and allow the Holy Spirit to renew our minds and hearts. I wonder how many times Joseph had to recall the dream he had with the angel, just to make sure his experience was real. I suspect he relived his encounter with the angel numerous times.

Paul, a faithful servant of God and follower of Jesus, along with Paul’s disciple, Titus, understood how to find joy in the midst of living in a world of oppression, hatred, and fear. We need to remember that Paul, himself, as a Jewish Pharisee killed numerous Christians while working on behalf of the temple, but he changed when he listened to the voice of Jesus. Paul, like Joseph, after hearing the voice of Jesus, knew his life was changed forever; no one could talk Paul out of what he encountered on the road to Damascus. This is called, owning your faith.

As the Letter of Paul to Titus says, “When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us … through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.” Paul and Titus both believed in the power of making a commitment between God and themselves. Today, as Christians, we retell the story of Jesus’ birth, to help us renew our commitment on why we are Christians.

Because hidden in a courageous mother named Mary, and a frightened fiancé, named Joseph, we find our own story of redemption. God loved so deeply that he sent his son to deliver us. Amen.