

*And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. St. Luke 2:9*

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It seems to me that we've been learning so much over the past two years. Lots of things about epidemiology, right? About how viruses work and about what we need to do to prevent the spread of the virus. But maybe lots of other things as well: like how to appreciate what we have, especially when it gets taken away for a while; and about how to set better priorities and goals in our lives.

But I have to confess that I'm even more excited about something that may not excite you nearly as much. Thanks to COVID and all of its many variants, everyone's being forced to learn the Greek alphabet one letter at a time.

Alpha. Beta. Gamma. Delta. And now, of course, Omicron. We've all heard of those variants. But you may not know that there were also variants named after the other letters of the Greek alphabet; variants that never amounted to anything serious: Epsilon; Zeta; Eta; Theta; Iota; Kappa; Lambda; and Mu.

So, now that we're all becoming Greek scholars, I want to introduce you not to another Greek letter but a whole word; a Greek word that you already know; but which you may not have realised plays a huge role in the Christmas story.

It's the word mega! Like mega blocks; or mega millions! There are mega stores; and before the pandemic you could go to all kinds of mega-conferences. If you suffer from megalomania, for example, then you might wish to use a megaphone to announce how great you are. And very little could happen in the world these days without all the megabytes (and gigabytes and terabytes that allow our computers to function. Just about everything comes in a mega-size these days; so much so that we might easily assume that the word 'mega' is a new word for a new age. But it is, in fact, a very old word, and you may not realise that it showed up in this evening's Gospel.

*And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.*

Did you hear it? Probably not. It comes to us translated as '*they were sore afraid*'. ἐφοβήθησαν φόβον μέγαν Literally, they feared with 'mega' fear.

And that, I think, is an idea that's not so far from our own thoughts this evening, especially as we continue to walk all of these tremendously uncertain COVID-filled days. After all that we've been through over the past two years, maybe we can understand what Luke means when he speaks of 'mega' fear. There's a lot of fear and uncertainty out there these days; and maybe in here as well. And maybe we can imagine what the shepherds were thinking on that night long ago when a dark and quiet hillside exploded in blinding light. 'Mega' fear, as Luke calls it.

But the word 'mega' shows up a second time in this evening's Gospel:

*Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.*

In that blinding moment on the hillside, when the shepherds were feeling a fear

greater than they'd ever known before; mega fear; when all seemed terrifying and catastrophic, the message of the angel was not just a message of joy but a message of great joy; of 'mega' joy.

But let's be honest: what does 'mega' joy look like in a world where pain and suffering are all too real; where wind and water and earth rise up to strike with sudden and unrelenting fury; where the loss of a broken marriage, or the pain of hurtful words, or grief for the loss of loved one, can make the idea of ordinary joy, let alone something called 'mega' joy, seem like a kind of childish hope. We have enough 'mega' fear these days; Omicron is making sure of that; so where can we ever hope to find 'mega' joy?

Well, first of all, not in kinds of stuff that the world tries to convince us will bring us joy. Stuff may make us happy for a moment but not for long.

To find the joy promised by the angels, we have to follow where the shepherds went; to Bethlehem; to find a baby wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.

If we want to find 'mega' joy, then we too must go to peer into the darkness of a stable, to find the light of the world in the most unlikely of places.

And in a world where so much of what we once thought was reliable and sure, the unshakeable good news is simply this: that the God of all creation; the God who set the stars in their course, came to us; vulnerable; weak; utterly dependent on others for his care.

Jesus was and is Emmanuel, God with us. And he knows the reality of our pain all too well; it was the pain and sorrow that he bore for us.

So, the promise of 'mega' joy is not a promise to live a life free of suffering. Christ's birth offers no insurance policy against evil or pain, against suffering or loss.

Christ's birth instead tells that He was born to live each of those moments with us; that even our darkest moments, even the moments of isolation and loss that COVID continues to bring us, are less dark because Christ lives each and every one of them with us.

God knows your mega fear, whatever those fears may be. But he also promises mega joy.

So, in your mind travel with me to a dark stable in Bethlehem. Look into that manger in Bethlehem and all you will see is a baby; a weak, vulnerable, innocent, helpless baby. But imagine how this powerless infant is the way that God comes into the world. That's what the angels promised,

*Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.*

God has come to earth. And therein lies our hope and our joy.

This night, in the child of Bethlehem, the God who created a universe so vast that we can only hope to see a bare fraction of it enters our world in a space so small that it is hardly noticed. Yet in this place of vulnerability and weakness the Creator speaks a Word that answers all our doubts and all of our fears. And just as he entered that stable that night so long ago so he enters this place this night: in His Word and Sacrament he comes to us. The Christ who was born for us then is, by Grace, the Christ who born in us now. And for that reason, and that reason alone, I wish you all a very happy Christmas.