

Christmas Eve 2016, 5pm

Let's do some Christmas ABC's.

We begin with **A—Adorable**, but not because baby Jesus is so darned cute. We adore and bow down before him not just as a precious infant, but first for identifying God's presence in him.

That's more shocking because of our letter **B—Barn**. "Were you born in a barn?" is a condescending question, but tonight it ascends to the highest point. The one born in a barn is identified with God. God isn't located in halls of power or the fortress tower, not identified in lifestyles of the rich and famous. God is marginal, left out, when there was no room in the inn. Yet in that Kind of birth is where God wants to be found.

Which brings us to **C—Christ**, the title that gives us the name "Christmas." We already had our letter A, but the English word for Christ is Anointed. The Hebrew is Messiah. It's a term about being chosen by God, to accomplish God's work. Generally in the Bible, priests and rulers and prophets were anointed for their chosenness to do God's tasks. For baby Jesus, it's not about recruiting him for one of those specific godly jobs. Calling him Christ means his entire life is revealing God for us, showing us how God works and what God is up to.

But we note he's not the only Christ. With those holy workers of old, you are also Christ-like, or—in a term I prefer—you're little Christs. Anointed in baptism, you've also been chosen to receive and embody God's presence.

Which raises the obvious question: what is God up to, then? What is God's work for and through you? What is Jesus showing or proclaiming about God as he lies there asleep in the hay? What should we know about God's presence?

For that, we get to **D—Don't**. We have a pretty strong sense that approaching God comes

with "don'ts," with rules to follow of stuff we shouldn't do. For example, during college when I told friends that I was going to be a pastor, their first reaction was always to apologize for swearing around me. There's some sense that connections to God mean Don't Swear. Beyond that, we also presume: Don't Cheat. Don't Lie. Don't Fight. Don't Be Mean. Don't Abuse. Don't Drink Too Much. You probably in your mind can keep adding to lists of Don'ts, of what we imagine are God's expectations of our actions.

But the Don't we hear tonight is: Don't Be Afraid. Don't Fear. Do not worry or be scared. This is the primary definition of God's work, what Jesus is arriving to enable us to trust, the good news of Christmas.

Don't Be Afraid is a hard message to believe, though, isn't it? Our fears stretch from tiny and silly to unfathomably complex, from being afraid that we won't get what we want for Christmas on to being afraid our lives won't turn out how we wished. We may fear we won't get what we need—food, a warm bed, the next paycheck, an effective medical treatment, resolution to an argument, home safely. And yet the angel has the nerve to tell us Don't Be Afraid.

It gets worse than those individual concerns. We're overwhelmed by fear in these days, of what will or won't change with the next President and the next budget cycle. We're afraid of tragedies caused by racism and immigration, from xenophobia. We worry about homophobias that undermine people's wellbeing. Our societal phobias stretch on and on. There are wars and rumors of war, irrational fears of getting caught amid terror attacks or being shot. We have reason to be terrified of climate change. This all nearly incapacitates us, immobilizes us, silences, shuts us and shuts us down, almost forcing us to surrender when things go wrong.

That may be why God announces so definitely and defiantly Don't Be Afraid. Because our fears confined us, but God wants us to be both free and open to each other. More, God operates in our capacities, the sharing of abilities that join to make this world good and better.

That is so important that I got away from our alphabet for a minute there. Let's get back to it with **E—Everybody**. This is also core to the proclamation. It's not just about people who make it to church often enough. It's not a Christian deal. It's not those behaving to follow the religious rules (because, remember, there weren't rules; the only Don't was Don't Be Afraid). It's not just for shepherds who were in the right place at the right time or a blessing one can claim more of. The angels announce this is for everybody. The good news, calling an end to fear, this birth, the arrival of Jesus is for me, for you, for your family who's far away, and the dude at the gas station tonight, and folks waiting in hospitals and nursing homes, and those sadly infected by violent thoughts, and ladies wearing headscarves, and guys refusing this celebration. For everybody. No one should feel or be separated from this.

**F—Find**. In order to trust that amazing, extravagant message, you need assurance. "You will find a baby," the angel says, wrapped in warm pajamas and snuggled in a feed trough, as a sign, an indicator. This isn't hypothetical good news leaving you to speculate whether it could really be true. This verification you find first in baby Jesus. And extending that forward, as you follow him, you'll witness the fulfillment of the promise. In him you may know and trust God's work is happening.

G. G could easily be God or gospel or grace, good churchy words. G could be government, since this story confronts the given order. But for Christmas, let's say **G is Gifts**. The Christmas

presents you give are symbols of sharing and practice at cherishing and caring for each other, just as we already said God's work is found in our living together in community, building each other up and supporting everybody. In these broadest views of sustaining life, we should especially recognize here on Christmas we are able to give because of what God chooses to offer. God adores you and wants full and abundant life, so all you have is a very good gift.

**H—Home**. That's distinct from H—Heaven. Christians sometimes claim heaven is our home and this world isn't. But God's work isn't kept for afterdeath experiences somewhere else. This story tonight places God in our midst and surrounded by livestock. We find God's gifts here and now. Jesus is born so we may know God dwells among us; the home of God is among mortals. God's presence is here on earth, in our lives, in the places where you'll return (just as the shepherds do), at the tables you'll gather around, in beds where you'll lay your own heads to rest (just as baby Jesus did). God is with us, in the very ordinariness of it all.

Realizing, then, that this story can only be fulfilled when you leave church to go back with many other good things to do in those places of home, I'm going to leave you the rest of the alphabet to fill in on your own, as a gift of one more **H: Homework**. You're welcome, and Merry Christmas.