

My Dearly Beloved of the Diocese of New Jersey:

Do not be afraid; for see --I am bringing you news of great joy for all people: for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is the Messiah, the Lord...

Luke 2:10-11

The wondrous announcement of the angel Gabriel to the Shepherds captivates me. The angel speaks clearly to the shepherds: "Fear not!" How often our lives and our worlds are marked by fear. Anxiety and angst are deep. It is often paralyzing. We must heed the angelic messenger and fear not! More than that, we need to embrace the news which the angel announces: "To you is born this day in the City of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord." It is Good news, saving news, for those shepherds and for us.

The great German Reformer Martin Luther once wrote:

"The Gospel does not merely teach about the history of Christ. No, it enables all who believe it to receive it as their own, which is the way the Gospel operates. Of what benefit would it be to me if Christ had been born a thousand times, and it would daily be sung into my ears in a most lovely manner, if I were never to hear that he was born for me and was to be my very own? If the voice gives forth this pleasant sound, even if it be in homely phrase, my heart listens with joy, for it is a lovely sound which penetrates my soul."

("To You Christ is Born" from *Watch for the Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas* Farmington, PA: Plough Publishing House, 2001; see entry for December 24).

I pray that Gabriel's angelic announcement will sing in your ears and penetrate your soul this Christmas. May the infant Jesus be born anew into your heart and life this Christmas, and may the Gospel light of that birth bring you and yours great joy.

Susan and our family join me in wishing you and yours a blessed Christmas and a happy and healthy New Year.

Faithfully yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Chip Stokes". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a small cross at the beginning.

+Chip Stokes
Bishop of New Jersey