

CHRISTMAS FEAR
York United Ministries
Rev. Bruce J. Roffey
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Christmas fear. Christmas and fear are not two words we commonly associate with each other. When we think about Christmas we picture scenes of celebration and happiness, we hear songs of joy and we feel hopeful and peaceful. Certainly, as we approach the manger in the twinkling of candlelight there is a profound sense of awe and reverence but not fear.

Yet, curiously, the Biblical Christmas story has several references to fear, which run almost unnoticed as an invisible thread.

When an angel appeared to Zechariah to tell him that his long-abandoned hope for a child would be fulfilled in the birth of John, he was troubled and fear fell upon him. But the angel said, "Do not be afraid."ⁱ

When Gabriel came to Mary and announced that the Lord was with her, she too was troubled and afraid. But Gabriel said, "Do not be afraid."ⁱⁱ

When Joseph heard that Mary was pregnant, he was troubled, but an angel appeared and said, "Do not be afraid."ⁱⁱⁱ

Shepherds huddled together to warm themselves against the cold Judean night when an angel appeared to them and scared them witless. They were filled with fear, but the angel said, "Do not be afraid."^{iv}

Christmas for us may be gentle, serene, hopeful, joyful, even awesome, but for the first participants there was Christmas fear enough to drive them to their knees. But of what were they afraid? They were afraid of God. Here heaven embraced earth with the glory of God. They were caught at the intersection of the transcendent and the immanent, where the holy meets the profane, where the sacred overwhelms the secular, where what had been wholly and totally other and beyond them, now encountered them in majesty and tremendous mystery. Is it no wonder they came unglued with Christmas fear?

In this modern day and age, we try to talk people out of the fear of God as if it were at least passé and preferably wrong. I recall a study group I led some time ago that was attended by a man of no church background and very little knowledge of the Christian faith. Such people are interesting as well as challenging because they lack the easy acceptance of underlying assumptions that most of us take for granted. So one day he asked me what the phrase "the fear of God" meant. Why would we fear God when we believe God is love? I gave him a rather superficial explanation about how the meaning of words changes over the centuries and what was meant by fear was really reverence or awe. For most of us that was a reasonable explanation, but not for him. He was left, shall we say, unsatisfied and skeptical. He was right to be.

Saying that God is love and saying that God is to be feared – not just revered but feared – are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, we might say that our fear follows from God’s love as a first, although not final, response. God’s love is demanding. God’s love is absolute, exclusive and hence fearful. It claims us and calls us, and has implications. Absolute love requires total surrender. Our fear reflects our unwillingness to accept the implications of love.

Yet, when we totally surrender ourselves to the tremendous mystery of God, there is an equally incredible joy at God’s intense and personal concern for us. The fear of God then is a double-edged sword; it cuts as well as protects. It attracts as well as it repels.

Throughout the Bible, whenever people encountered the divine they had an overwhelming sense of attraction as well as an overwhelming sense of repulsion. As with Adam and Eve, they want to run and hide, while at the same time they are attracted.^v

When Abram was 99, God came to him to establish the covenant that he would be the father of a multitude of nations. His name Abram, which means exalted father, would be changed to Abraham, which means father of a multitude. This news was surprisingly wonderful, but Abram fell on his face in fear.^{vi}

When Jacob was travelling and stopped at Bethel, he had a dream – the dream of Jacob’s ladder going up to heaven. On

awakening, he was afraid. "Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it."^{vii}

When Moses heard God speak from the burning bush, he hid his face because he was afraid to look at God.^{viii}

When the people of Israel witnessed a brief, fleeting revelation of God in a mountain storm, they said they seen enough and sent Moses to see the rest by himself.^{ix}

When Isaiah was called by God, he was afraid and cried out, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips."^x

When Peter encountered God's power in Jesus, he fell on his knees. "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord."^{xi}

When Saul, later to be Paul, met the living Christ on the road to Damascus, he was knocked flat.^{xii}

That is the way it is with our encounters with God. God's attention, God's love, God's concern are so intense, so awesome, so tremendous, so mysterious, so holy, so accepting, so marvelous, so wonderful that it frightens us. The truth is that if we open ourselves to God, if we risk encounters with God, we will fear God. We will not just be filled with reverence and awe, but with fear that rattles the soul. God's otherness yanks the ground from beneath our feet. God's infinity reveals our vulnerability. God's power uncovers our weakness. God's holiness unmask our sinfulness. God's love exposes our selfishness. God's eternity underscores our mortality. How can we do other than be afraid?

I think I have described before my experience presiding at the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper for the first time following my ordination. As a lay supply the previous year, I had shared in the liturgy with others, but now it was my responsibility to preside, to pray the prayers of consecration, to recite the words of institution, break the bread, pour the wine and share the gifts of God with the people of God. I quaked in my boots. I was afraid, not just because I might make a mistake – I knew I probably wouldn't – but because of the tremendous mystery of what we were doing. I was afraid at my audacity at daring to say, "This is the body of Christ broken for you." "This is the blood of Christ spilled for you." How dare I?! How dare anyone really?!

At the Table, we are face to face with God. We encounter the divine and our masks are ripped away. Yet as our hands shake, we hear in our souls the angel of God, "Do not be afraid." "Do not be afraid."

Why? Why shouldn't we be afraid? Because the One you fear comes as Saviour. "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord."

In C. S. Lewis' novel *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the children are off to meet the King when they are told that Aslan the King is not a man. He is a lion. "Then he isn't safe?" asked Lucy. "Safe?" said Mr. Beaver. "Who said anything about

safe? `Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

Just so said the Christmas angel. The One who comes isn't safe, but he's King, wild with holiness. So do not be afraid, for he is good. He comes as Saviour.

Isn't this the good news that banishes fear?^{xiii} If Christ be for us who can be against us?^{xiv} Those who fear the Lord are those who understand that the One who reveals our powerlessness and disrupts our calm securities brings his own power and offers his own security. And therefore, there is nothing and no one to fear but God.

A god who is too small to fear is too weak to trust. The God of Christmas revealed in Christ terrified those first participants at the first Christmas, and he is more than holy enough to make any sane person quake inside. He is not safe, but he is good. It is his goodness that encourages us to step forward as did Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph, and the Shepherds to trust God.

God has come among us, but "Don't be afraid," the angels say. "You can trust him. He is good. He is so good that he is your Saviour."

Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ Luke 1: 12, 13.

ⁱⁱ Luke 1: 29, 30.

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 1: 20.

^{iv} Luke 2: 9, 10.

^v Genesis 2 and 3.

^{vi} Genesis 17

^{vii} Genesis 28: 10 – 17.

^{viii} Exodus 3: 6.

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- ix Cf. Exodus 20: 19.
 - x Isaiah 6: 5.
 - xi Luke 5: 8.
 - xii Acts 9.
 - xiii Cf 1 John 4: 18.
 - xiv Romans 8: 31.