

When Fear Gives Way to Joy

Zephaniah 3:14-20

“The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more.”

—Zephaniah 3:15b.

“Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light; the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”

The line, of course, is from a beloved Christmas carol, “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” What Christian doesn’t cherish the image of eternal light beaming from the cave where the Christ child dozes in the arms of his mother? Who doesn’t celebrate the hope his birth brings to a world where hope so often seems in short supply?

But fears? What has fear to do with Christmas?

The history of the carol provides a hint. “O Little Town of Bethlehem” was written in 1868 by the famed preacher Phillips Brooks. The Civil War had ended only three years earlier. Yes, Lee and Grant had signed their peace accord at Appomattox and shaken hands on the deal. Yes, battle-weary veterans from both sides had laid down their arms and trudged home. But half the nation still lay in ruins, and the notorious Andrew Johnson — by most accounts the worst POTUS the nation had ever seen — was doing his best to dismantle the rights that had been won for the former slaves at such a terrible human cost.

On the home front, north and south, families had been decimated by the carnage of the most brutal war America had ever known. Wives and mothers counted themselves lucky if their husbands and boys had come home lacking an arm or a leg or an eye or shivering with PTSD. They knew he could easily have not come home at all.

In 1868, it gave Americans some comfort to picture the humble Bethlehem stable as the place where hope and fear meet each other — and where hope emerges the ultimate victor.

What do people fear this Advent?

The answer, no doubt, is as varied as the number of worshipers on this Sunday morning. So many of us are living with fears of imminent catastrophes, real or imagined. These are anxious times. Whether rich or poor, employed or unemployed, members of the majority culture or minorities subject to racial profiling, the cacophonous “Ain’t it awful?” refrain of our culture pounds its way into their hearts and minds.

One very privileged woman said that, rather than joy, her life was filled with fear. She was freaking out about...

- Whether she forgot to get a gift for anyone she would be seeing on Christmas,
- Whether she bought adequate gifts for her co-workers,
- Whether her children have an equal amount of presents to open,
- Whether she messed up the name tags and gave the wrong gifts to her boys,
- Whether her youngest will think that Santa thought he was a bad boy this year,
- Whether her husband would like his gifts and
- Whether she has money left over to cover for those she forgot.

Long after Brooks put pen to paper to describe those silent stars floating over Bethlehem’s deep and dreamless sleep, we still yearn for the abiding peace that is freedom from fear, whether it’s the fear of a privileged consumer or the fear of refugees like Mary and Joseph, escaping persecution by fleeing to another country.

John the Baptist sets the alarmist tone in today's gospel lesson: "Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (Luke 3:9).

Is that cringeworthy enough for you?

Far from delivering comfort and consolation, John's prophecy is calculated to disturb. Yet, it is as much a part of the church's Advent proclamation as the message of comfort and peace.

Christians are used to looking to the Old Testament for prophetic condemnation and to the New Testament for consolation, but this week the order is reversed. Luke is trafficking in fear while the Zephaniah passage sounds a note of triumphant hope: "The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more."

Not that Zephaniah's larger prophecy is all sweetness and light. Like his contemporary Jeremiah, Zephaniah in the early chapters of his book voices the message of the angry God:

"On that day, says the LORD, a cry will be heard from the Fish Gate, a wail from the Second Quarter, a loud crash from the hills. ... I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the people who rest complacently on their dregs, those who say in their hearts, 'The LORD will not do good, nor will he do harm'" (1:10, 12).

His words are an indictment of our culture. How many of our neighbors respond to the gospel message with a shrug, "The Lord will not do good, nor will God do harm"? We're on our own.

Yet, we do not vanquish fear by denying or avoiding it. We need to admit that fear is as much a part of the Christmas story as peace and joy.

It actually helps to begin our Advent journey with a frank acknowledgment of our fears. For it is only by moving through our fears to the joy that awaits us on the other side that we truly grasp the triumphant good news of the Christ child coming into the world.

There's more fear in the Christmas story than most of us care to be reminded of. It's unmistakably present in John's fiery preaching, of course, but we glimpse it also in the angel's repeated greeting: "Do not be afraid." Yes, the angel says not to be afraid, but the fact that such an exhortation needs to be voiced at all is an admission that fear is an ever-present reality — then and now.

You just don't get that in the secular version of the coming holiday. It's all light and no shadow, all merriment and no depression. As for those who turn for a moment from the relentless yuletide cheer to acknowledge some all-too-human problem or difficulty, they might be accused of lacking sufficient "Christmas spirit."

Walter Wangerin captures the shallowness of secular Christmas merriment with these words:

"Mindlessly do the bells of secular celebrations jingle for Christmas. Meaninglessly do carols repeat their tinny joys in all the malls in America. No richer than soda pop is every sentimentalized Christmas special on TV. Fearless is the world at play with godly things, because Godless is its heart. If God is a laughing Santy, why should we be afraid?"

But God is no "laughing Santy."

Secular culture may be quick to domesticate God into a benevolent grandpa, a kindly figure very much like Santa Claus, but that's not the full biblical witness. God is to be loved, yes; but God is also to be feared.

This may seem a problematic thing to say — especially to neighbors who may have felt demoralized in their younger years by an image of God as harshly judgmental (and at times, perhaps even terrifying). Some of us may be quite pleased to declare that we've grown beyond such a fearful image of God. "Our God, is a God of love and peace, of empowerment and affirmation."

Well, God is all these things, to be sure — but do we really want to discard the biblical understanding of God as righteous judge?

Clearly, John the Baptist wants no part of such a world — nor do the gospel-writers, as they bookend the Christmas story with angels who preface good news with "Fear not," on one side, and with the soldiers of a jealous king who run babies through with their swords, on the other.

We don't get to Christmas joy by detouring around fear. We get there, as Phillips Brooks knew, only by allowing the hopes and fears of all the years to meet one another in that little town of Bethlehem.

Who would advance such a crazy idea that seems so out of step with popular culture? A Christian, that's who! A Christian who believes God's promises and knows them to be true. In this life there are things to be feared — no doubt about that. If we did not fear the worst outcomes of human life — illness, poverty, pain, suffering and all the rest — we'd be considered foolish. Yet both Zephaniah and John are telling us good news. They're telling us that all these fears of ours are ultimately as nothing when laid up against the great plans God has for this world and all who dwell therein.

Leonard Sweet tells a story about a certain Native American tribe who had a unique way of training young braves. On the night of a boy's 13th birthday, he was led out into the wilderness to spend the night alone. Most young braves, at this time in their lives, had never been away from the security of their elders. Yet on this night, these young teenagers were blindfolded and taken miles away. When each one took off his blindfold, he found himself in the middle of the woods. Alone. Dependent on nothing but the good will of the Great Spirit, and his own survival training.

We can well imagine what a terrifying night that was for these young boys. Imagination magnified every woodland sound, until it seemed like a fearsome monster.

But then, finally, each young brave managed to get to sleep. When dawn broke, he rubbed the sleep from his eyes and looked around. What he saw was an amazing sight — a tall man, standing just a few feet away, armed with bow and arrow. It was his father. He had been there all night long, weapons at the ready: watching over his son, as he slept.

Into each human life, some fears must intrude. There are indeed times when thick darkness surrounds us, and we may justifiably wonder if we'll ever see daylight again. Yet even in times of loneliness and despair — especially in times of loneliness and despair — we are not alone. There is one who waits beside us, to watch over us and protect us.

This is a prime message of the glorious season for which we are now preparing ourselves.

The heart of Christmas is the theological doctrine known as the Incarnation, that, as the gospel-writer John puts it, “the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory” (John 1:14). Christian writer and poet Kathleen Norris from South Dakota says that “the Incarnation is the place ... where hope contends with fear.”

The good news of this bright season is not that we have nothing to fear in this life, but rather that our fearsome and powerful God has the ability to bring us through every lesser fear that may assail us.

O little town of Bethlehem, it's true that "the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." In a matter of days, we will gather to celebrate the good news of the Messiah's birth. May we discover anew, in these days of expectation, that when hope meets fear in Jesus Christ, the lesser fears of this life are vanquished. The only one we need fear, then, is God, and the fear of God, as Proverbs says, is "the beginning of wisdom" (9:10).

May the peace of God...

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