

The Hopes and Fears...are Met in Christ

Luke 2:1-20

December 24, 2009

The most common response of the characters of the Christmas story is fear! Of course, who wouldn't be afraid if an angel appears out of the blue with a life-changing message. Zechariah is at the sanctuary, the house of God, a place where you might expect to experience the holy presence, and yet when the angel appears to him, he is overwhelmed with fear! "Do not be afraid," is the angel's response, "for your prayer has been heard."

Mary is a teenager at home in Nazareth when the messenger of God announces the miraculous birth that is to come from her. Naturally she is perplexed and stunned by this seemingly impossible occurrence. "Do not be afraid," said Gabriel, "for you have found favor with God."

The shepherds in the fields watching their flocks are terrified by the dazzling light that appears in the night sky. The angel said, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people; to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord."

Fear, anxiety, terror – all are natural responses to the unknown. All are typical of the way we humans react to change.

Another response to the unknown is hope. Each character in the Christmas story who responds with fear receives the assurance of an angel, "Do not be afraid." Through the angels God offers a promise, a seed of hope. Trusting in that promise, Zechariah, Mary, and the shepherds move beyond their fear and act in hope.

They move forward even into the unknown future knowing that whatever may happen to them, they will not be destroyed, for nothing will separate them from the love of God which has called them to this journey. Zechariah faithfully waits with Elizabeth until their son is born, and as instructed by the angel, he names the child John. His mouth is opened and he offers a prophetic song in honor of his son. Zechariah's fear is met by hope in the birth of his child.

Mary ponders the perplexing announcement of the angel, takes it to heart, and makes room in her womb and her life for God's Holy Child. Mary's fear is met by hope in the birth of her Holy Child.

The shepherds, too, leave their fear in the fields with their flocks and take action to see the child of whom the angel spoke. They trust the messenger and claim the hope of their promise. They discover the sign of the child lying in a manger, confirming the gift of good news. The fear of the shepherds is met by hope in the sight of the Babe born in Bethlehem.

Life, and oftentimes God, startles us with an unforeseen event, a surprising opportunity, or a challenging circumstance. We are caught off guard, likely overcome with fear of the unknown. Yet when we pause to regain our footing, we can anchor ourselves in the presence of God with us always. Rooted in this promise, we can venture forward with hope that new life will blossom out of the old.

The Christmas tree was originally meant to be a sign of hope. The first Christmas “trees” were merely swags of evergreen, decking the homes of Northern Europeans at the ritual of Winter Solstice. The evergreen branches reminded the pagans of the eternal cycle of the season, which at the Solistice—the turning of the earth on its axis—would begin the lengthening of days, the return of warmth and light, and eventually the resurrection of the Spring time. In the dark and cold of winter they wanted and needed to be reminded of the hope of Spring.

As Christians appropriated these rituals, they added many wonderful and meaningful things. Whole evergreen trees were brought into the home and decorated with candles to represent the stars in the heavens on the night Jesus was born. An angel or large star was placed at the top of the tree to signify the star of Bethlehem or the angelic chorus singing in the fields that night of his birth. Below the tree, figures of Mary, Joseph, the Magi, Shepherds and the animals which were kept at the inn were fashioned to represent the Savior’s humble birth.

Light broke into the darkness of history during the events in Bethlehem. Hope conquered the fear of those who experienced the miraculous appearance of the angels. The yearning for a King who would reign with love and justice was fulfilled in the birth of Jesus, the Prince of Peace.

The signs, symbols, songs, and story of Christmas send rays of light into our darkness. The Holy Child of Bethlehem comes to empathize with our pain, to absorb our fear, and to lead us forth with hope.

Dr. Henry Betts, founder and former CEO of the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago is a tireless advocate for people with disabilities. He tells about a young man in the Rehab institute several years ago. This teenager was a paraplegic who became terribly depressed, stopped communicating with anyone, was virtually speechless, assumed a fetal position all day long, and went into total withdrawal.

Then the staff put another patient in the room with him, a three-year-old boy who had been severely burned.

The teenager turned his back and ignored the little boy at first, then began to notice and watch him and listen to what nurses and doctors were saying. The teenager started to care about his little roommate. Before long he was pushing the all button, telling the nurses to bring pain medicine. He was nagging them—maybe he needed some water, some more food, he wasn’t eating enough. He

started to tell the nurses and doctors what he observed and advised them as to treatment and therapy.

The teenager started to care, to have compassion, to love--and to live. His fear and despair were transformed into hope and love, all through the presence of a child.ⁱ

God comes to us in the Christ Child, to empathize with our pain, to share our burden, to brighten our darkness, to meet our fear with the hope of a blessed future.

This holy night, do not be afraid my friends, but trust in the gift of God-with-us, Emmanuel, Jesus the Christ, for in him all our fears are overcome with hope.

Wondrous Creator, we marvel at the miracle of life you have given us to enjoy. We stand in awe at the depth of your love, for in Jesus you come to journey the valleys, roads, and mountaintops of life. We rejoice in your abiding presence with us.

We entrust to your healing care our fears. We are fearful for our children, for our health, for our jobs. We are fearful for our world, for the violence, poverty and disease that diminish so many lives. We are afraid for the health of our planet.

Come alongside us, Lord Jesus, walk with us into the unknown future. Instill in us a deep trust in your presence. Embolden us to follow your way and will. Transform our fear into hope, a hope that empowers us to faithful action.

Shine hope into hearts that feel unworthy. Shed hope upon one who is lost and looking for direction. Beam hope into the spirit of one who is haunted by the past.

With the birth of Christ, you renew our promise to raise us to new life. We open our hearts and spirits to receive your holy presence anew. Fill us with faith, love, and hope. We pray in the name of the precious child of Mary. Amen.

ⁱ Rev. John Buchanan, Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, December 24, 2007.