

Christians are used to looking to the Old Testament for prophetic condemnation and to the New Testament for God's 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. Zephaniah gives voice to God's anger: *"I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth, says the Lord. I will sweep away humans and animals; I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea" (1:2-3).* Zephaniah continues: *"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 [God] do harm'" (1:10, 12).*

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

Yet, we do not vanquish fear by denying it or avoiding it. We need to admit that fear is as much a part of the Christmas story as is peace and joy. Our Advent journey includes a frank acknowledgment of our fears; for it is only by moving through our fears to the joy that awaits us that we truly grasp the triumphant good news of the Christ Child coming into the world.

In truth, there's more fear in the Christmas story than most of us care to admit. It's unmistakably present in John's fiery preaching, but we glimpse it also in the angel's repeated greeting: "Do not be afraid." 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 malevolence. 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 the "Christmas spirit."

Walter Wangerin captures the shallowness of secular Christmas merriment: "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 philanthropist, 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 feel demoralized by an image of God as a harshly judgmental and terrifying deity. Some of us may be quite pleased to declare that we've grown beyond such a restrictive image of God. "Our God," such theological optimists claim, "is a God of love and peace, of empowerment and affirmation."

God is all these things, to be sure, but we cannot be too quick to discard the biblical view of God as righteous judge. Clearly, John the Baptist preaches a word where there is a final judgment and an ultimate accounting for deeds of good or evil. And the gospel-writers agree, 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 kill baby boys with 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 Native American tribe who had a unique way of training young braves. On the night of the boy's 13th birthday, elders took him into the woods to spend the night 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 men. 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, perhaps, the most important message of this glorious season: we are never alone! The heart of Christmas, as the gospel-writer John puts it that, *"the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory"* (John 1:14). Christian writer and poet Kathleen Norris put it this way: "the Incarnation is the place...where hope contends with fear." The good news of this season is not that we have nothing to fear in this life, but rather that our fearsome and powerful God is able to bring us through every lesser fear assails us.

O little town of Bethlehem, it's true that "the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." Tomorrow 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).

Prayer: Almighty God, it is dark outside, and the nights are long. We watch and wait with mounting expectation for the coming of your son into the world. We ease our waiting with the blandishments of tinsel and tree. We delight in their beauty, but Lord, in our eagerness guard our hearts from celebrating the things we have made instead of the gift you will give. Amen.

Sources:

- Sweet, Leonard. *SoulSalsa*. Zondervan, 2000, 23-24.
- Wangerin, Walter. *Preparing For Jesus*. Zondervan, 1999, 59-60.

When Fear Gives Way to Joy

Sunday, December 23, 2018

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Luke 3:1-18

"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, "O Little Town of Bethlehem." What Christian doesn't cherish the image of eternal light beaming from the ramshackle stable 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 does fear have to do with Christmas?

The history of the carol provides a hint. Phillips Brooks wrote "O Little Town of Bethlehem" in 1868 when the Civil War was only three years ended. Half the nation still lay in ruins. President Andrew Johnson was doing his best to dismantle Lincoln's program of reconstruction and to deny former slaves the rights won for them at a terrible human cost. Families decimated by the carnage of the most brutal war in American history counted themselves lucky if a husband or son came home lacking an arm or a leg or shivering with PTSD. They knew he could easily have not come home at all. In 1868, such fears were very real. So, it gave Americans some measure of comfort to picture the humble Bethlehem stable as the place where hope and fear meet each other, and where hope emerges victorious.

What do we fear this Advent? Natural disasters? Terrorist attacks? Financial instability? Political unrest? Job insecurity? We live in anxious times! 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 which is freedom from fear.

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). 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.