

Christmas: Where Fear Meets Hope

Luke 1 & 2

Charles Dickens featured three ghosts in his classical story “A Christmas Carol”: The Ghost of Christmas Past, Christmas Present, and Christmas Future. Each evoked a different fear in the character Ebenezer Scrooge.

I’m not going to talk about three ghosts of Christmas but I do want share with you about the three fears of Christmas.

The three fears of Christmas tend to frighten and haunt people more than the literary phantoms that appeared to Ebenezer Scrooge.

Fear was a big part of Christ’s first coming to earth, and fear will play a major role at His second coming. However, fear is never forced upon us. We aren’t victims, that is, people without choices. In fact, we have a choice to make today between fear and hope!

In my last sermon for 2016 I am closing the year with the same message we opened with... HOPE.

Romans 15:13 (NKJV)

At the end of Luke’s Gospel Jesus talks about fear and hope at His second coming.

Luke 21:26-28 (NKJV)

Jesus’ warns... *“Men will faint from fear...”*

But in the next breath He offers a word of hope... *“When these things begin to take place, look up and lift up your heads because your redemption is drawing near.”*

So the choice is before us; hope or fear, fear or hope. Which does Jesus represent to you?

There’s a seemingly contradictory line in the Christmas Carol “O, Little Town of Bethlehem”, *“The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”*

Strange as it may seem, I think it is right, don’t you?

Christmas is about humanity and divinity; about both hope and fear. Think of it like where the land and sea meet there’s a lot of churning turmoil, foam, mire, flotsam and jetsam. When God entered humanity through Jesus at Bethlehem, hopes and fears existed side-by-side. (and they still exist)

In another of his novels, “A Tale of Two Cities”, Charles Dickens begins with the oft-quoted words...

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times ... it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to heaven, we were all going direct the other way..."

I think this author also nails it. Hope and fear, expectation and terror, co-exist in a state of tension at all times in our lives, but especially at Christmas.

Of course, during this month of celebration we want to believe that throughout the holidays our problems, anxieties, and even fears cease to exist. Christmas is supposed to be *"different"*. (Joy, Peace, Love)

The death angel should stop working around the world in December.

Funerals should be on stand-by until after the New Year.

No one should get a "pink slip" at work during the Holidays.

The word "divorce" shouldn't to be mentioned in any home during this season.

Every emergency room should be empty -- because no one need be injured or ill at Christmas!

Yet, is this Christmas as you know it, where you and I live, in the real world? Of course not.

Christmas is not about the absence of fear or tough circumstances but, rather, about the presence of the Savior in the midst of our lives.

Another hymn "Oh for a Thousand Tongues to Sing" says, *"Jesus, the Name that charms our fears..."*

So, fear is a legitimate emotion of the Christmas season, but it need not control us as long as we put our hope in God.

With that in mind let's consider a few Fears of Christmas.

Luke 1:5-10 (NKJV)

The first fear emerges when an angel appears to Zechariah, husband of Elizabeth, a couple whose marriage had produced no child. They had long since given up on the idea of being parents because they were both too old to have a baby. All hope of being parents and experiencing that love was long gone.

Luke 1:11-13 (NKJV)

It is in this text that we encounter the first fear of Christmas...

FEAR #1: The Fear of the UNEXPECTED

Have you ever had someone jump out at you on a dark night and yell? For a moment you were startled, right? What happened? You encountered the unexpected and it produced fear, maybe even terror.

We all prefer our fears to come with warning labels.

When we get on the roller coaster ride we know the big drop is coming after the big climb.

When we watch “Jaws” the movie we know when the shark is going to appear. Music changes...
Forewarned is forearmed.

We can handle fear if we are braced for its appearance.

What is really frightening is when we encounter the totally unexpected – such as when an angel shows up in full regalia and splendor to answer a very old prayer – one that we long ago put in the “hopeless” file.

By the way, what do you think God does with our forgotten prayers? Do our prayers have a shelf life? Is there an expiration date stamped on our petitions? Should we ever say, “Well, I guess it isn’t ever going to happen”?

Zachariah represents us all here because, although he once held out for a miracle, in his case a son, he had lost all hope of it coming to pass. He was afraid it was a lost cause. He was now just numb. Time had worn him down.

Like Zachariah, most of us simply go through the routine of faking our hope, though we actually fear that God has turned a deaf ear to our prayer. We go through the charade of saying our prayers, but if an angel were to show up with the answer, I think we would be, well, afraid!

Notice that the angel said that Zachariah’s prayer had been heard...

When did God hear him?

How long ago had Zachariah began praying for a son?

How often had he prayed this prayer?

What caused him to lose hope?

His age? Elizabeth’s age?

Time and lack of seeing an answer?

When a couple is going to have a baby we say that “they are expecting”. Well, Zachariah and Elizabeth weren’t expecting anything at this point. They had given up their hope.

Christmas is about being confronted by the unexpected. The birth of the Messiah. God becomes a human. How much more unexpected can you get than that?

We are the ones who turn Christmas into little more than ritual and routine and tradition. We strip the Incarnation of mystery and then wonder why we are afraid.

So, God sometimes does things to shake us up. He appears out of seemingly nowhere into our lives and says, “*I am here!*”

I pray that we will all get jolted by the Divine at least once this Christmas.

In the midst of the hum-drum, I pray that we’ll receive answers to our unanswered prayers. I pray that hope will replace fear and that we can move from the ordinary to the extra-ordinary.

Now let's skip down to;

Luke 1:26-31 (NKJV)

Here we find Mary receiving the message from the angel that she will soon carry the Messiah in her womb. And here we encounter, along with Mary, a second fear of Christmas.

FEAR #2: The Fear of the UNCONTROLLABLE

The angel's greeting bewildered Mary!

I am sure she had her life all planned out...

First, she'd marry handsome Joseph.

They were going to build a nice little house with a garden out back.

Then they'd start and raise a little family.

When they got older the kids would take care of them.

Oh and they'd all go to synagogue each Sabbath and pray for the promised Messiah to come soon.

But then Gabriel showed up.

That's when she discovered a new fear – the fear of the uncontrollable. One short uninvited and unexpected conversation derailed all of her cherished plans.

Let's face it, most of us are control freaks! We don't welcome the unexpected and we don't want any part of our lives to be out of our control. We actually spend a lot of time organizing things so our lives will be predictable.

And that's when God usually shows up and our fear kicks in!

Frankly, Gabriel's reassurances did little to calm Mary. She did not doubt the angel, like Zechariah. No, she believed him. That was the problem. She had to come to grips with the fact that her entire life was about to change – radically.

If what Gabriel had said to her was true, who in her life was going to accept her story? Pregnant before marriage – but *"Yet, it's okay because it was by the Holy Spirit..."* Surely Joseph, her parents, and the local rabbi would all believe that alibi, right?

Wrong.

Mary's fear came from hearing a message that brought struggle and threatened the predictability of her life.

Are we ready for such a message this Christmas... Jesus is going to completely change your life? Can you and I say with hope like Mary, "May it be according to your word"?

God may answer your prayer in a completely different way than you want.
God may have a different job for you and we may transition into it in an unconventional manner.
God may want to begin a new ministry through you, one for which we feel extremely under qualified.

The antidote to the second “Fear of Christmas”, the fear of the uncontrollable, is HOPE.

Hope like the Psalmist had long ago...

Psalm 46:1-3 (NKJV)

When we hope in God our fears are overcome. The fear of unexpected and the uncontrollable are silenced.
As has been said: “We are safer in a storm with Jesus than anywhere else without Him.”

Finally, let’s discover a final fear of Christmas...

FEAR #3: The Fear of the UNKNOWN

Luke 2:8-10 (NKJV)

The shepherds weren’t just afraid – they were greatly afraid!

No human had ever been in audience of a heavenly oratorio featuring an angelic choir before. And as amazing as it was, for sure it was a frightening experience.

The Shepherds had been tending their sheep in the fields, helping their ewes to lamb successfully. Ironically as dirty as that left them, they weren’t even ritually qualified to attend services at the nearby Temple. They were certainly not candidates to go to a baby shower for a king, much less The Messiah. But God, with His eternal sense of wonder, specifically invited them.

In fact, they were commissioned to be the very first evangelists.

Think of it, shepherds, people so despised they weren’t allowed in those days to be a witness in court, were chosen to be joyful witnesses to God’s arrival!

The fear of the unknown can be revealed in many ways. It comes as a nudge from the Spirit; a prompting to step out and do something far outside our comfort zone. And it always comes full of question marks and uncertainties because it comes from God.

Yet taking our hearts in our hands, as the shepherds did, we approach the manger and find there cause, not to fear, but to hope.

When the western part of our country was being tamed there were men and women who ventured across the mountains into the unknown. The pioneers took all the risks and faced the struggles. They went to the unmapped and unknown places. Then, when they had conquered the unknown, the pioneers called back over the mountain peaks to the settlers, "Its safe for you to come out here now!"

The shepherds were like our western pioneers.

They faced the unknown that night long ago, vanquished their fears, and still stand as examples inviting us to join them in worship of the Savior.

There are still at this Christmas fear-filled "unknowns" for all of us to face. Like caterpillars, we must decide whether to play it safe as mere hairy worms or go through the scary chrysalis stage that will transform us into resplendent butterflies.

The spiritually unknown places beckon us today. Are we equal to the call? Have you chosen hope over fear this Christmas?

CONCLUSION

Zechariah, Mary, and the Shepherds all had to confront the fears of Christmas. But they didn't remain afraid. They moved on to hope and experienced the divine. And so can we.

God's antidote to the fears of Christmas is the command to "not be afraid".

But He does more than merely give us a word of comfort.

Psalm 23:1-6 (NKJV)

God offers to walk with us.

We have hope.

And hope disarms our fears every time. The fears may still be there in our minds, but hope is greater than any and all of them.

"The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."

Fear not. Hope has come.

His name is Immanuel -- God with us.