“When Fear Gives Way to Joy”

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Zephaniah 3:14-20

December 15, 2019: Third Sunday of Advent

**Zephaniah 3:14-20**

14 Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! 15 The Lord has taken away the judgements against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more. 16 On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. 17 The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing 18 as on a day of festival. I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. 19 I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. 20 At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the Lord.  
  
“Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light; the hopes and fears of all the years are met in the tonight.”

That line is from the beloved Christmas carol, *“O Little Town of Bethlehem.”* We cherish the image of eternal light beaming from the place where Mary holds her newborn son. We celebrate the hope his birth brought into a world where hope, both then and now, often seems in short supply.

But the verse from the carol also includes fears. What does fear have to do with the celebration of Christmas?

“O Little Town of Bethlehem” was written by Phillips Brooks in 1868. The Civil War had ended 3 years earlier. Lee and Grant had signed their peace accord at Appomattox. Battle-weary veterans from both sides had laid downs their arms and trudged home. But half of the nation still laid in ruins and President Andrew Johnson was doing his best to dismantle the rights that had been won for the former slaves.

Families in the north and south 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 sons came home lacking an arm or a leg or an eye. They knew there were many husbands and sons who had not come home, but instead had died on the battle fields.

Beginning in 1868, when *“O Little Town of Bethlehem”* was sung, it gave Americans some comfort to picture the humble Bethlehem stable as the place where hope and fear meet – and hope emerges as the victor.

What do you fear this Advent?

I suspect the answer to that question is as varied as the people in this room. As parents, we fear some thing or someone will harm our children, and that fear doesn’t lessen whether the child is 3 or 30 or 60. Children fear something will happen to their parents. We fear hearing words from a doctor that will change our lives from that moment forward. We fear the rancor currently occurring in this nation will never end and this country will not recover from all the divisiveness that emanates from every aspect of the political spectrum.

Admittedly, sometimes our fears do lean a little to the ridiculous. Recently, a blogger wrote that her life was filled with fear, rather than joy. She was freaking out about…

• whether there was anyone for whom she forgot to get a gift, especially is they showed up with a gift for her and she didn’t have one for them.

• whether she had bought adequate gifts for her co-workers.

• whether her children had an equal amount of presents to open.

• whether her youngest would think that Santa thought he had been a bad boy this year.

• whether she messed up the name tags on the gifts she had wrapped and given the wrong gifts to the wrong people.

For some who will gather in this sanctuary at 5:00 this evening for our Blue Christmas service, they could only wish the only thing preventing them from experiencing joy was mixed up tags on Christmas presents.

Fear so easily permeates our lives, so much so that often we don’t even realize fear is hanging over us like a shawl draped over our shoulders.

It has been 150 years since Phillips Brooks wrote about Bethlehem’s deep and dreamless sleep. We still yearn for freedom from fear and so did the people to whom Zephaniah spoke the words of today’s scripture.

The early chapters of Zephaniah, part of a divine judgement against Jerusalem, speak out forcefully against the people of Jerusalem, particularly for their lack of care for those among them who struggled to even survive.

Earlier in Zephaniah we read:

“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. The inhabitants of the Mortar wail, for all the traders have perished; all who weigh out silver are cut off. At that time, 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.’ Their wealth shall be plundered, and their houses laid waste. Though they build houses, they shall not inhabit them; though they plant vineyards, they shall not drink wine from them.” Zeph 1:10-13

Fear inducing words!

Fear also permeates the time prior to and surrounding the birth of Jesus.

The angel says to Zechariah:

“Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John.” Luke 1:13

The angel Gabriel says to Mary:

“Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.”

Luke 1:30-31

The angel says to Joseph:

“Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.” Matt. 1:20

And to the shepherds outside Bethlehem, keeping watch over their flocks of sheep during the night:

“Do not be afraid, for see—I am bringing you good tidings 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.” Luke 2:10-11

I think It is safe to conclude that God understands our inclination to let fear rule our lives.

Perhaps it’s unfortunate that there is none of this fear where the secular celebration of Christmas is concerned. The secular celebration of Christmas is all merriment. In the secular celebration of Christmas, if one turns from constant yuletide cheer to acknowledge some all-too-human difficulty or problem, they are often accused of lacking “the Christmas spirit.”

The words from today’s scripture in Zephaniah must have been like a balm to the people who heard them, words that faced fear and moved to restoration.

We don’t get to Christmas joy by detouring around fear. We get there, as Phillips Brooks wrote, only by allowing the hopes and fears of all the years to meet one another at the event that occurred that holy night in the little town of Bethlehem.

Perhaps *the true spirit of Christmas* is acknowledging the fears in our lives, the times when darkness surrounds us and we wonder if we’ll ever see the light of day again, the times of loneliness and despair. And then remembering that we are not alone. That the Word became flesh and lived among us.

As Christian writer Kathleen Norris says, “the Incarnation is the place…where hope *contends* with fear.”

Watching *A Charlie Brown Christmas* this time of year is a tradition for many. A favorite scene is when Linus, standing on an empty stage, recites the story of the angel’s appearance to the shepherds from the Gospel of Luke. Did you know that scene almost ended up on the cutting room floor? TV network executives thought it was too religious and the reading from Luke too lengthy. Thankfully, the producers persisted and the scene remained and has become a cherished moment.

There’s one feature of that scene that many don’t notice. Just before Linus begins his recitation, he drops his security blanket. If you’re familiar with the character of Linus, you know he’s **never** without his blanket.

Over the years of the comic strip, Charles Schulz would occasionally deprive Linus of his blanket—such as those times the mischievous Snoopy steals it. Every time that happens, the usually cool, calm, and wise-beyond-his-years Linus dissolves into frenzied angst. Linus simply cannot be without his blanket!

*Except* this moment…

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iNMgmf0NTO4>

Fear giving way to joy!

As it was for Linus, may it be so for us.