

December 10, 2023

“Exchanging Our Fear for Faith”
Luke 2:8-20

FCF: Needing to exchange our fear

PROPOSITION: (anchor) Jesus knows all our fears.

(magnet) And He calls us to look to Him in faith.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

As we move into the holiday season, a PSA might be helpful. “How do you deal with a bad gift?” First, be honest. Don’t praise the gift. Be neutral. “I love sweaters.” Second, thank the giver for their thoughtfulness, not the gift. Third, determine where the gift was purchased. “Wherever did you find this?” And, fourth, regift it. That’s your PSA. You can thank me later.

We’ve all gotten bad gifts. That said, some are worse than others - not just hard to get rid of but harmful to keep. Which brings us to our Advent series - “The Great Gift Exchange.” What gifts has the world given us? ? Fear, despair, and condemnation. Oh, to be rid of these!

This week, we’re looking at fear. So we’re heading to the fields outside of Bethlehem.

SCRIPTURE READING: Luke 2:8-20

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

There’s much fear surrounding Christmas. Think of Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*. Marley’s face on the knocker has Scrooge on edge. The bell ringing, the noise on the steps, the opening of the door, and the appearance of Marley’s ghost - this was all so troubling. To say nothing of the news of the coming of these three visitors that night. It was all so very fearful.

Just as it was in the lead up to the first Christmas. Zechariah was troubled and fear fell upon him at the sight of the angel. Fear came on his neighbors at the news of his son’s arrival. Luke tells us that Mary was greatly troubled by the angel’s appearing. Matthew tells us that Joseph was afraid to take Mary as his wife. And then, of course, there are the shepherds (**READ Luke 2:9**). They were frightened, terrified, or as the KJV put it, “sore afraid” by this appearing.

Now, at this point, you might be saying, “Interesting. But I’ve never had an experience like that. So how is it relevant?” We all know something of fear. It might be a low level worry or a debilitating terror. Studies show that anxiety disorders are now the most common mental illness in the U.S. They affect one in every thirteen people, 800% more prevalent than cancer.

Does the Bible have anything to say on this? Yes. And here’s what we can know. Jesus knows all our fears. Each one. And He calls us to look to Him in faith. Let’s unpack that. First, looking at our common struggle. Second, some needed clarity. Third, this stunning example.

I. OUR COMMON STRUGGLE

First, as the general statistics and our personal stories show, this is a common struggle.

A) Various Options

And there are various options we can choose from, different solutions we can seek.

1. The paths well trod

We can look to ourselves, trying to control our circumstances. Or we can separate ourselves, taking on worry like a shield. We can prescribe meds or therapy. Those are all paths well trod.

2. The religious path

One more would be the religious path, the super-spiritual angle, trying to pray our worry away.

B) Partial Solutions

Those are the various options. And each can offer partial solutions.

1. Often helpful

There is something good to be found in disciplining our thoughts, taking control of our lives, getting help as needed from medications or therapists, purposeful Bible reading and prayer.

2. But insufficient

But, given the complexity of the issues and persons, those solutions are often insufficient. And can leave us all the more desperate in our search. Or perhaps causing us to sink into cynicism.

So that's our common struggle with worry, anxiety, and fear. It's all around us.

Application:

That might even be you this morning. You might have tried some of these approaches and found them wanting, for whatever reason. And so, even as I bring this up, you'd rather not think about it. You'd rather avoid it, ignore it, press it down and wish it would go away.

So I say this with all compassion. We must not take the path of avoidance. And we need not. For the Bible speaks to all of life. The Lord knows all our fears. And He speaks to this.

II. SOME NEEDED CLARITY

Which brings us to our second point. That is, some needed clarity on this conversation.

A) A Definition

What are we talking about when we speak of fear? Here's a bit of a definition.

1. What it sees

Fear has to do with what and how we see. That is, we see the potential loss of something dear to us - acceptance, our health, finances, the well-being of a loved one. It sees a potential loss.

2. What it misses

But what does it not see? What does fear miss? It sees partially. It assumes what will happen, the impossibilities, a lack of meaning or good. It presumes much, leaving out a great deal.

B) A Reframing

Our fear is a flawed sight. And it needs to be reframed, understood in a new light.

1. Fear is natural

Now, for starters, such fear is natural. It's not always sinful. Think of the shepherds that night.

2. Fear as an indication

Fear can be natural. And, as such, it can be an indication, a sign of the things that are important to us. Our worry, anxiety, and fear stick to what we value. Which can bring us self-awareness.

That's worth thinking about. We need some clarity as we consider the topic of fear.

Illustration:

Think of it this way. Your doctor leaves a voicemail. "We have your test results. Please call us." That spins up your fear. Why? You value your health. You don't want to be sick.

Application:

Here's some simple facts. The world is scary place. And we are finite and weak. Our fear is a place to do some digging. What does your fear tell you about what you treasure? About your desire and ability to hold and protect those things? Fear is an indicator. It tells us things.

That said, we have to say more. We need a fuller picture. We need a greater vision of Jesus. James Martin, a Jesuit priest, wrote in a recent *New York Times* bestseller ([READ](#)):

The maxim of illusory religion is: 'Fear not; trust in God and He will see that none of the things you fear will happen to you.' Real religion has a different maxim: 'Fear not; the things you are afraid of are quite likely to happen to you, but they are nothing to be afraid of.'

Which brings us to our text and the shepherds out in their fields, watching their flocks by night.

III. A STUNNING EXAMPLE

We've heard this so many times it's easy to miss the wonder, the drama, of this stunning example of fear at work, of fear spoken to, and of fear being transformed. It's really something.

A) A Story of Transformation

1. The beginning of the story

This is a story of transformation. Think of how it begins. These men are truly terrified. They are shaking and trembling. Pulses racing, breathing labored, wanting to hide and find an escape.

2. The ending of the story

That's how it starts. But how does it end? They are encouraged and emboldened. They move from shaking on the ground to seeking on a quest, now heralds moving forth with a message.

B) The Wondrous Message

How could this be? The reason for the change is found in the message they bear.

1. Good news - general

([READ Luke 2:10-14](#)) They have heard and been arrested with the good news - the gospel.

2. Good news - specifics

News of God's glory - what He is doing. News of God's peace - what He is bringing. News of God's grace - how all this has come to pass. This is what the angels have proclaimed to them.

C) The Needed Response

It is a wondrous message. And we see the needed response in these shepherds - faith.

1. The dynamics of faith

What are the dynamics of faith? It's often described as having three parts. Knowledge of the facts. Assent to and agreement with the message. And trust, reliance upon what has been heard.

2. A popular myth

Knowledge, agreement, and trust. Now a popular myth would have us believe that faith is a blind leap. But that's not it at all. Biblical faith is never a blind leap but an informed step.

That's what we see with the shepherds. Based on what they knew, they took steps.

Illustration:

Let me press here. Holiday TV Special Faith is "just believe." Just believe. Believe because you want it to be true, even if you haven't a shred of evidence that it is true. Believe that it's going to snow, that we'll be home for the holidays, that we'll get that perfect gift, etc. That's not the faith of the shepherds. That's not what transformed them. We're speaking here of making the best inference based on the evidence, a real stance that lacks any reasonable doubt.

Application:

The shepherds heard the message and it went to the root of their fear. That faith rewired their hearts. They embraced it and rejoiced. And so can we. For it's the same message today.

And it can have the same effect (**READ Luke 2:14**). Let me put it this way. We don't need to avoid, ignore, or play down our fears in order to flourish. Given who God is, what He has done, is doing, and will do for us, we can face the immensity of it all and know that we have the infinitude of heaven both for us and with us. That's the Immanuel promise. God with us.

Whatever our fear may be, He looms larger. He overwhelms whatever would threaten to overwhelm us. Jesus knows all our fears. All of it. And He calls us to look to Him in faith.

CONCLUSION:

That is part of the great gift exchange - our fear for faith. We said fear is an indication. It reveals our hearts. But our fears are not just indications. They are not just flashing red lights on the dashboard. They can be invitations as well, opportunities to move in a whole new direction.

Imagine you receive a card in the mail, an invitation to a different kind of Christmas gathering. It's not a loud and crowded event, full of noise and activity. This will be a quiet affair - not so much a dinner party as a dinner invitation. And the host? It's Jesus. Your host is Jesus and He is inviting you to come and sit with Him. Yes, you are to bring bags and there will be boxes and presents of sorts in those bags. But they are your fears. That's what you are to bring.

How does that grab you? The appointed evening comes. You arrive at the door. And He welcomes you in. "Here, let me take your coat. And those bags." You sheepishly hand them to Him. Later, after the meal, He opens the bags and unwraps the boxes, each of your fears. He sees it all and asks you a question. "What would it look like to give this to me, to leave it in my hands, and trust me with it?" What would it look like? He goes further. "What would it look like to look to me, learn from me, lean into me - even there?" Again, what would it look like?

"Fear not!" the angel said to the shepherds that night. And he gave good reasons why. That message still echoes. Jesus knows all our fears. And He calls us to look to Him in faith.

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