

Christmas Eve
Isaiah 9:2-7 Titus 2:11-14 Luke 2:1-14
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
December 24, 2022

In the Christmas gospel, what is the shepherds' first reaction when the angel appears? They're terrified. In the presence of God's glory, they're scared out of their wits. And that is a recurring picture throughout the Bible. So many of the prophets in the Old Testament...Ezekiel, Isaiah, Jeremiah...have those experiences where they're cowering in God's presence, with no cover, no place to hide. Standing in God's light, they feel like they're going to die.

When Job finally sees God face to face, he says, "I had *heard* of you, but now my eyes have *seen* you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes." So all these biblical people experience the direct glory of God as a consuming fire which will annihilate them. They see him as a direct threat to their existence. Why? It's not that he's mean or judgmental. It's just that all they can see in God's light is their own sin and mortality, and it's terrifying.

Does that change in the new testament? No. We've got the shepherds in tonight's gospel. We've got the Transfiguration, where Jesus is up on the mountain top with the disciples. Suddenly the glory of God is all around them. And until Jesus puts his hand on the disciples and tells them don't be afraid, they're face down on the ground, trying to hide. Of course they are. They're sinners in front of God.

So am I missing something in my life? Where's this holy terror? I know it's out of style to talk about fear when it comes to God. But where is this God of the Bible who, when he shows up, people drop to their knees?

When I think of where my fear lives, I've got to say, I usually think of stuff out on the edges of my life. There's stuff out there on my perimeter I admit I'm afraid of. Certain groups of people I don't agree with politically. Certain leaders. And I'm spiritually armed and spiritually *ready* to fight against those powers out there on the edge of my life. I'm *ready* for criminals who are thinking of breaking into my house. I'm *ready* to voice my opinions on those groups out there on the perimeter who I think are ruining the world. That's where my fear usually lives—beyond my perimeter. Otherwise I'm pretty comfortable.

Now, every once in a while, the fear creeps through my perimeter and gets personal. I hear something from the doctor. I see someone I love suffering, and it strikes fear in my heart. I look at my body and I realize, it's true...this is not going to last. I never really believed it, but this is dying! Or, I experience a failure somewhere in my life—in my work or in my relationships. Or someone makes some remark...and my pride, my self-assurance, are thrown into question. Suddenly the fear comes in and becomes personal, even paralyzing at times. So yeah, we've got fear, don't we. We've got fear. But you know, I can always buck up. I'm strong. I'm not an Illini anymore. I'm a Buckeye. So I make it through...until of course, the fear creeps in again. It always does, but I'll fight my way through.

Speaking of fear, Karen and I both agree that having children changed our whole perspective on life. Holding a baby in our arms, suddenly everything out there beyond the perimeter got a lot closer. The dangers weren't abstract any more. With those precious babies in our arms, with that passionate, new, protective love and hope in our hearts, we realized how precious life was. And it's like, we suddenly started seeing good and evil more clearly. The stakes got much higher. The more precious life becomes, the closer and more real all those threats become.

Then I hear God's word on Christmas Eve. It always helps you see the world through God's eyes. And I realize God has a tough nut to crack if he wants to get through to me, doesn't he! Because, like I said, I'm ready to fight against anything that creeps in to take my life. And isn't that exactly what God wants? My life! But I'm so ready to defend myself, I'm so ready to fight, that I cannot see the difference between God and all those other things that I'm guarding my life and my family against.

It's just like Jesus says, "If the owner of the house knew the time when the thief would come, he would not let the thief break into his house." God is the thief Jesus is talking about there. God wants to break in and take us to himself. But we're protecting our perimeter all the time. Isn't it disturbing what scripture is telling us: in trying to keep out the worldly things that threaten us—we end up shutting God out too. That's my blindness as a modern person—I cannot see the hand of God at work in my everyday fears. He's trying to get through to me. He's calling me to get out of myself, out of my defensive bastion, and to come follow him in this world. But in sin, when I hear that call, all I see is the worldly threats out there...the people who will rip me down. All I see are my own weaknesses, my own sin, my failures, my mortality. As Peter said, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man."

Our problem is that when God calls us to come close to him, which he's always doing, we don't see God. All we see in front of him is ourselves. Our own fear and death and evil. All we see is the huge and uncrossable gap there is between what we are and what he is.

Well, on a night just like tonight, long ago, God did something to bring us willingly to our knees, in fear and hope. Christmas is not about God calling us to come to him through our fear and our defenses. No, Christmas is when God crossed quietly broke through our perimeter to make a permanent home with us in our darkness and fear. Christmas is God putting himself fully, bodily, visibly, vocally, into the story he wrote for us. Even though he must have known it was going to hurt him real bad. Even though he must have known he was not going to last long in this world. It's God saying "I'm here. Don't look away anymore. Don't just see the distance between us, the hostility, the fear, the conflict anymore. Stop looking back at yourself, at your brokenness. Look me in the eyes. See me now, for who I am."

And suddenly we're standing here with this baby in our arms. This fragile little human being—with bones and skin and blood and a little heart beating, a little baby breathing the same air we're breathing. Look where he puts himself. In our arms. It's like God saying, "you want to know where I am, and what I'm doing every day? OK. Take care of me. Love me. Hold me. Nurture me. With your own eyes, see what I see when I look at you. With your own hands, do for others what I do for you every day." This is God. Uncloaked. Full self-disclosure. Fully revealed. Nothing hidden. And here he is, God resting in your arms and mine. Looking up at us with

human eyes. A God so big in love that he willingly becomes small. A God who will age with us. Who will suffer with us. Who will die with us. So that wherever we are, we can know where he is.

I love the line in *Amazing Grace*: “‘Tis grace that taught my heart to *fear*.” It’s Jesus who puts our fear where it’s supposed to be. Those things out there on the perimeter—the evils, the corrupt leaders, the diseases...those are not what are going to break in and take us in the end. Don’t fear them. They never were going to have that power. No. The great Thief beat them to the punch. He snuck in quietly behind their backs. He didn’t take anything. Instead, a child was born. Salvation happened. The future was given to us.

I was saying how Karen and I didn’t know what true fear was until our children were born. This new joy, this new love, this new hope suddenly came into our lives. And along with it, a sense of extreme responsibility, a sense of how high the stakes are, how precious life is. Christian fear is not really about losing anything. It’s about being in love with a God putting himself completely in our hands, and who says “it’s your move now. What are you going to do with me?” That is how free he has made us, when it comes to how we can respond to him. And as we see in scripture, the shepherds, the wise men, responded their way. King Herod responded in his way. The disciples, the crowd on Palm Sunday, the crowd on Good Friday...they were all free to respond and do as they wished. At Christmas, God really put the ball in human hands, didn’t he. You and I are also free to respond now, to this little child who cannot force us to do anything at all, one way or another. How do we respond? *Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth.*