

Christmas 2024

♪ “Fear not, then” said the angel, “Let nothing you affright; This day is born a Savior of Virgin pure and bright, to free all those who trust in him from Satan’s power and might! O tidings of comfort and joy. ♪

That’s the third verse of the 19th century English carol with perhaps history’s most often-misplaced comma: God rest you merry, gentlemen. It is the same reassurance announced by the first Christmas angels, the hope that reaches into every age of faith: that God has come humbly into our world as one born like us, taking on our weakness to free us from the power of sin and death; God among us, to bring us comfort and joy.

Such is the timeless Good News of Christmas. ***But it is striking how often fear is intermingled with this story of comfort and joy as the Gospels tell it.*** Mary is deeply troubled at Gabriel’s visit nine months before that Silent Night in Bethlehem: “How can this be?” The angel assures her: “Do not fear, Mary. You have found favor with God. You shall conceive and bear a son and give him the name Jesus.”

When Joseph learns of Mary’s pregnancy, he too is troubled. It is due to his love for her, and for this Child who was such a mystery to him, that he decides to divorce Mary quietly, not to escape but to save her from stoning. And with her death, the infant Jesus in her womb would also have died. Yet God planned something different for Joseph. He too is reassured by the angel: “Joseph, son of David, have no fear about taking Mary into your home as your wife.”

When Herod hears of the newborn King of the Jews, he fears the loss of his power and so destroys the infants in the area trying to eliminate Jesus. His fear leads to death and sorrow, and yet it does not bring relief to his heart, it only makes his darkness grow deeper.

When the shepherds see the glory of the Lord and the angels praising God and announcig peace, they were struck with great fear, Luke says; they are told: “Do not be afraid, for I proclaim good news to you, tidings of great joy to be shared by the whole people.”

There are many more examples. *The accounting varies with translations, but some variation of words “Do not be afraid” appears over 100 times in the Scriptures* – from Jesus calling the first disciples and telling them: “Do not be afraid, from now on you will be catching men” to the storm on the sea to the raising of the daughter of Jairus to the fearful awe of the Transfiguration to the women at the empty tomb, the message “Do not be afraid” resounds over and over through both Old and New Testament.

Today / tonight, we hear the Christmas message of comfort and joy in a time so burdened by fear and uncertainty. *Like Peter walking on the water, we want to follow when Jesus says, “Come to me,” but so many troubles of our wounded world make the winds and the waves seem stronger than that invitation.* In whatever words we use, our hearts still call out like that sinking Apostle, “Lord, save me!” And as on the Sea of Galilee 2000 years ago, so today, Jesus is here to catch us, to save us from drowning in our fear, and confusion, and sadness. *These are the tidings of comfort and joy we most need to hear, words that can still capture something of what was revealed on that Silent, Holy Night: to know again the nearness of divine love and mercy, a promise kept in faithfulness to a Covenant made long before and forgotten by many, but never forgotten by God.*

Jesus comes not in overwhelming power but in weakness, in the wordless simplicity of an Infant. From the manger, from the Cross, from the altar, He tells us: “This is my Body, which is for you.” The Christmas revelation of divine Mercy does not make us tremble in fear but draws forth from us the natural response we have with any baby: to smile, to caress, to hold that Child close in love.

Bring whatever fear that dwells in your spirit this Christmas and leave it amid the straw of the manger. Hear instead Emmanuel, God-With-Us, say to you: “Take courage, it is I. Do not be afraid.” *Tidings these are, indeed, of enduring comfort and endless joy.*