**NO FEAR!!!**

Christmas Eve Meditation

**Rev. Ron Dunn December 24, 2019**

Luke’s narrative of the Christmas story lends itself rather nicely to a simple three act play that addresses the theme of fear. **Act I** anticipates the unfolding salvation of God in the appearance of an angel to the priest, Zechariah as he was burning incense to God in the temple at Jerusalem. Prior to this occurrence, Luke tells us that Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, were without children and this was a matter of deep concern for the two of them. When the angel suddenly appeared, Zechariah was terrified—and not just a little. Luke tells us that “fear overwhelmed him.” The unnamed angel responds to Zechariah’s fear with the response that we will hear throughout this biblical drama: “Do not be afraid, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John.”

**Act II** takes place far to the north in the little village of Nazareth where a peasant girl by the name of Mary receives yet another angelic visit—this time the angel has a name, Gabriel. Gabriel greets Mary by saying: “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” Mary, in contrast to Zechariah, seemed to be more perplexed and confused than terrified by the angel’s appearance and greeting. Nevertheless, the angelic response is exactly the same: “Do not be afraid.” The angel then adds, “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.”

**Act III** take place, once again, to the south in the open fields surrounding the village of Bethlehem, located just outside of Jerusalem. This time, it is the assembled shepherds who receive a visit from an angel whose glorious appearance causes the shepherds to tremble in fear. The angel draws, once more, upon that familiar response: “Do not be afraid!” The angel then goes on to explain, “for see—I am bringing you good news 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.”

Now it is important for us to keep in mind that these three acts and their specific angelic message all take place within the first two chapters of Luke’s Gospel. Three times in the first two chapters there is an angle who boldly instructs Zechariah, Mary and then the Shepherds: **“Do not be afraid!!”** Do you suppose that Luke is trying to make a point?! As a writer, Luke is not exactly subtle, is he? No, not exactly.

Now, in spite of what our Christmas cards might portray, the world into which Jesus was born was hardly a Norman Rockwell world of harmony and hope. Military threat and violence were the order of the day. The economy had tanked. Health care was a problem. Education was unaffordable. Terrorism on the rise. The gap between rich and poor continued to grow. Protests and uprisings were common place. Does any of this, by chance, sound familiar??

It was, suffice it to say, a fearful time in many respects. And it would have been easy for Luke’s readers to allow their many fears to get the best of them. It would have been easy to conclude that there was no reason to do anything other than to give into one’s fears. For fear, it seemed, was the only thing that made sense.

But Luke has a different perspective and he shares it vividly and boldly in the narrative of his Gospel. Contrary to popular opinion, there was reason to believe that fear would not be allowed to have the final say. In one brief sentence, the angel enumerates **four blessings** that are worthy of our attention this evening.

**First, no fear. Second, good news. Third, great joy. And, finally, all people.** **Eight words: No fear, good news, great joy, all people! That pretty much says it all, doesn't it?**

This evening we gather to pay homage to the baby born into a world that, despite all of its obvious differences, was not all that different from our own. The ominous reality of greed and violence, not to mention the lust for power and privilege, are forces that remain very much alive and at work in the world as we know it today.

It was, of course, FDR, in his inauguration speech in 1933, who voiced his now famous opinion that we, a nation, had nothing to fear but fear itself. While those words were especially timely in the depth of the depression, they have lost none of their relevance in this present moment of time. We, as people…as a nation…as a family of nations, have absolutely nothing to fear but fear itself.

**While we may agree with this premise in principle, we are finding it very difficult to translate into actual practice.** So many of the current events of our world seem to be driven by the menacing presence of our fears—our fear of the one who is different from us…our fear of allowing ourselves to appear weak or vulnerable…our fear of taking the risk of actually trusting others. These fears, of course, are real and they are waging war upon us individual people, as a nation and as a family of nations. Tonight, thanks to our fears, it sometimes appears that our world is teetering on the brink of its own self-destruction

Just how insidious our fear can be is evident the story a young man who was walking home from work through the park. It was late and he was alone. In the middle of the park, he noticed someone approaching him on the path. As the stranger drew closer, the man felt a spasm of fear. He veered, as did the stranger, but they had both veered in the same direction, causing them to briefly bump up against each other in the darkness.

As the man walked on, he began to suspect that their collision was hardly an accident and when he felt for his wallet and found it missing, he was convinced. In anger, he turned, ran and caught up with the pick-pocket and demanded the wallet. The stranger surrendered it without a word. When the man got home, the first thing that he saw was his wallet lying on the bed. He was staggered by the truth that he had just mugged somebody.

**When we give into our fear, we often expect the worst of other people and, in the process, we often withhold the best of ourselves.** The way of fear is the way that restricts, limits and incarcerates. It is the way that makes the whole world dark.

Yet, in the midst of that fear-filled darkness, there is a light that we celebrate, a light that shines in the eight word promise that an angel offers to the frightened shepherds—and to us this evening: **No fear! Good News! Great Joy! All People!**

**What I want to know, this evening is if you really believe that. What I want to know is whether or not you will not only take these words to heart, but whether or not you will trust them enough to actually put them into practice. In other words, will you choose to live like it? Will you choose to love like it? That’s really the question!**

**Story teller, poet, priest and lover of God, Brennan Manning** tells of the day the disgusted Prince of Darkness slinks up to the house of the faithful disciples who have made their home in Jesus and proceeds to nail a legal document on their door. It reads:

*\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_****Eviction Notice!\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_***

***You are hereby banished from the House of Fear forever.***

***With malice aforethought, you have flagrantly withheld the monthly rent***

***Of guilt, anxiety, fear, shame and self-condemnation.***

***You have adamantly refused to worry about your salvation. Already I have heard one dismal tenant say, “There goes the neighborhood!”***

***Your freedom from fear is not only dangerous but contagious.***

***Real estate values have plummeted; gullible investors are hard to find. Why?***

***Your callous and carefree rejection of slavery!***

***A pox on you and all deluded lovers of liberty!***

***The Prince of Darkness***

It was, you see, at Bethlehem that this eviction notice was first posted. For it was at Bethlehem that our world found a flesh and blood reason to banish all fear…a reason to withhold the rent of anxiety, shame and guilt…a reason to reject slavery and love liberty.

It was at Bethlehem that a baby, wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger, would remind us once and for all time that perfect love casts out all fear—even yours and even mine. **Amen.**