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Luke 2:8-11

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FROM FEAR TO JOY

Many of us may find it difficult to embrace the Christmas season this year. In addition to the hustle and bustle, we have been bombarded by so much distracting news of the world. We've had news of tsunamis and tornadoes, war and terrorism, political turmoil and budget fiascos. And what of our personal lives? Have you received difficult news lately, of broken relationships, a lost job, financial woes, or having to face illness or even death? Is there anxiety or fear in our lives? How do we face fear especially during this season of joy?

The journey from fear to joy is the theme for our Christmas morning message. We will look at this journey as portrayed in the angel's encounter from Luke Chapter 2. No other gospel encompasses the complete range of literature, including stories and poetry, hymns and carols, prophecies and genealogy, parables and miracles, sermons and theology. Luke used vivid, descriptive details to make scenes come alive in our imagination. No other scene in Luke's Christmas narrative is more vivid, more dramatic, than the appearance of the angels to the shepherds that very first Christmas morning 2000 years ago.

Luke 2 begins with the birth of Jesus. Luke 2:4-7 sets the context:

And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

The birth of Jesus is surprisingly devoid of drama; the moment is tender, intimate. The next verse describes the appearance of the angel to the shepherds in Luke 2:8-11.

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

This scene is dramatic and familiar to all of us. The verses are very densely packed with important themes. Let us briefly unpack some of these themes.

Shepherds in that society were humble, lowly folk. Here they were huddled together in the field, probably cold, hungry, and tired. Then the angel of the Lord appeared, and the glory of the Lord shone on the field. This glory was probably the incredible bright light that surrounded the presence of God Himself. Throughout the Old Testament, this light of God came as a pillar of fire, as lightning flashing in clouds or in a consuming fire in the mountain top (Ex. 24:17, 40:34). The shepherds were terrified! I would loosely translate this as "the angel scared the living daylight out of them"!

The first words of the angel to the terrified shepherds were, "Do not be afraid" or "fear not." These were the same comforting words given to

Zechariah and to Mary in Luke 1:13 and 30. Our God understands our fears and He gives us encouragement just when we most desperately need it.

How do the shepherds move away from fear? By receiving the "good news." The Greek used here "*euangelizomai*" is the verb form of good news or gospel. Literally the angel said, "I 'good-news' you", from which we get our term evangelize.

The news was to bring *Great Joy* – literally "mega-joy" or "super-abundant joy"; I will develop this theme in more detail later. The *Joy* went not just to these shepherds, but through them it also went to the townspeople of Bethlehem. Joy was bestowed on the wealthy Arabian Magi, to Simeon and Anna in the temple. The good news of great joy went to poor and rich, Jews and Gentile, men and women, young and old, to all peoples gathered everywhere and through all time.

What is the good news that turns fear to joy? It is the fulfillment of prophesy, the announcement of the Messiah! Each phrase of this announcement is significant.

Unto you is born this day ... from the prophet Isaiah (Is 9:6)

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

In the city of David ... from the prophet Micah (Micah 5:2)

"But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days."

Savior

This title refers to the deliverer of God's people, not from political oppression, sickness, or hardship, but from sin and death itself. This Savior redeems people to fellowship with God, the way they were designed to do from the very beginning. Jesus' name means, "the Lord is Salvation", and He is true Savior.

Christ

This is Greek for "Messiah", which is a title rather than a name: the Christ, the Anointed One of God.

The Lord

This the most astonishing title of all! The Messiah was not to be just a leader, prophet, or king (which Jesus was). This One is not a representative, but the Lord God Himself! This is astonishing and probably not grasped by the shepherds back then. In the same way today, many in the world acknowledge that Jesus came to earth, but only see Him as merely a good man, a teacher, a prophet, and a martyr. What unbelieving eyes fail to recognize is that Jesus is God, the Lord Himself.

These three astonishing titles, all wrapped up in “swaddling cloths” and laid in a lowly manger, are the *Source of Joy* for the whole world, for all time. What incredible news! As significant and densely packed as these phrases are, the overall structure and application can be simple.

Application

There is a journey from *Fear to Joy*, and this journey begins by receiving the good news of the coming of Jesus. There we have it, a simple announcement that has a profound impact on each of our lives. Let’s relate each of these themes to our own lives today, starting with the subject of fear.

It seems to me our world today is dominated by fear. Our global economy is teetering on the edge of collapse. Nations are at war internally and with each other. Terrorism and oppression are rampant. In our own neighborhoods, violence strikes at the most innocent – a 1-year old victim of gang violence, murder in a neighborhood stone quarry, spreading fear and death into our own streets just a few blocks from the church. And in our own personal lives, we are anxious over our jobs and health, we choose between paying rent or buying food, we face Alzheimer’s and Lou Gehrig’s disease and cancer in our loved ones. There is much fear that invades our lives from all sides.

Let me relate to you the fear I faced during my very first Christmas. I accepted Jesus as a young man just before going to graduate school. I faced my first Christmas celebration as a believer with excitement and anticipation. Then just around Christmas time, I received the news: my mother was diagnosed with cancer. Such was the news at my first Christmas – news that brought not joy, but fear, into my life. I feared for her life, the pain that she would face, I feared the heartache all of us may experience. How do I handle this fear, disillusionment, and disappointment as a young Christian? The angel’s words encourage me, “do not fear.” This seems easier said than done.

“Do not fear” appears 365 times in the Bible. Why? Why are we not to fear? Because a Savior is coming and has come, one who is adequate to deliver us and free us from fear, a Redeemer who has come to change the situation and use it for His glory and kingdom. The angel promised that the coming of Christ would dispel fear and bring joy. This means that the presence of Christ in our lives ought to result in an absence of fear and the presence of joy! Have you experienced this kind of fearless joy accompanying the presence of Christ?

I have. For me, the moment of my conversion when I accepted Christ was accompanied by a sense of deliverance and freedom. For the first time in my life, I felt certain of my identity as a child of God, assured that I have God’s forgiveness and love. This gave me exhilarating joy!

I realize that this exuberant joy at our conversion is not a once-for-ever experience. It is an on-going process throughout our Christian walk. We need to continue to go back to the *Source of Joy* during times of fear, not because the joy fails us, but that we forget and need to be reminded. We don’t face frightening situations just once or twice in our life; we face them all the time. Anytime something strikes terror into our hearts, when we are anxious, stressed, troubled or weary, whenever some situation threatens us or our loved ones, there is fear. For that moment – for all those moments – we are reminded that we have a Savior, who is none other than the Lord, Creator of Heaven and Earth, to bring us joy. Because of Him, we are not afraid, but have joy.

So how did this work out for me? How was my fear transformed to joy? During that first Christmas and subsequent weeks I prayed, begged, and pleaded that God would save my mother’s life, that the dreaded disease would be lifted from her body. Finally during the following summer, my mother died of cancer. What happened? Where was the promised joy?

The joy came exactly as God promised, but completely different from my expectations. Joy came not because my mom’s physical body was healed, but because Jesus came into her world. A few weeks before she died, the Lord sent an angel to our home in the form of a Chinese pastor. God used this pastor to soften my mother’s heart, and she invited Jesus into her life. My mother became my sister in Christ. Her fear did indeed turn to joy, joy that endures beyond death itself.

In late August that year, my mother was wracked in pain and unable to speak. My whole family surrounded her bed. She opened her eyes – they were clear, I remember. She touched her forehead and pointed up toward the ceiling and beyond. Then her hand dropped and she blinked. I don’t know what she was communicating to us. I can only imagine that at that moment she saw her Lord Jesus beckoning to her, welcoming her home. An hour later, the paramedics pronounced her deceased. But to me, she simply stepped into a new, better life in Jesus’ arms. She had joy in her heart, and her clear eyes spoke that joy loudly into my life.

So on my second Christmas and all subsequent ones, I understand how the good news can dispel fear and bring great joy, a joy that is beyond circumstance and is eternal. This news was Jesus’ birth into my mother’s life; it was her Christmas moment, her Bethlehem.

Conclusion

Today I want to draw for us the parallel between the physical coming of Jesus into the world as a baby in Bethlehem with the spiritual coming of Jesus into your world, your heart at your conversion. It’s not enough to celebrate Christ having been born into the human world 2,000 years ago. What really counts is Christ to be born into your human heart today. What we ought to celebrate is your “Christmas,” the moment when Christ came to you and was born into your life. And you were born into His life. If this hasn’t happened yet, what better time to do so than right now? Invite Him in, make today your Christmas, make this place your Bethlehem!

For those who already have experienced this spiritual Christmas, I encourage you to meditate on this remarkable parallel of Christ’s physical birth and His spiritual birth into your world. This parallel can give so much more meaning to Christmas each year. Jesus is born in us as surely as he was born in Bethlehem. And the joy of this birth sustains us through all trials. We now have a Savior who can handle all problems. He doesn’t promise to take away our problems – illness, financial woes, or in my mother’s case physical death. But He does promise he will take us through it. He will strengthen us to face it and give us courage. Let’s make room in our hearts for Jesus and follow him as he takes us from *Fear to Joy*.

“Do not be afraid, for I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

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