

To (Not) Be Afraid

Luke 2:1—20

Let's begin tonight with the FAMILIAR. I'm guessing tonight that you are already familiar with this story. The shepherds are familiar. The angels are familiar. Bethlehem is familiar. The manger, with the cattle lowing, is familiar. And so, the assumption tonight may be that everything has been said and done—or that we've watched this show before, and that it's now streaming on the Internet, available on *Netflix* or *Amazon* or *Apple TV* any time we want. So why be here tonight? If Christmas is in the air, or in the ether—if the story of the birth of Christ is ubiquitous and all too familiar, why bother?

According to historians and archaeologists, there are words etched in stone among the walls of an ancient Greek-speaking city in present-day Turkey. It's known as the *Edict of Priene*; and if we read and listen very carefully today, it sounds vaguely familiar.

“Since Providence, which has ordered all things and is deeply interested in our life, has set in most perfect order by giving us Augustus, whom she filled with virtue that he might benefit humankind, sending him as a savior, both for us and for our descendants, that he might end war and arrange all things, and since he, Caesar, by his appearance (excelled even our anticipations), surpassing all previous benefactors, and not even leaving to posterity any hope of surpassing what he has done, and since the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of the good tidings [εὐαγγέλιον] for the world that came by reason of him...”

—and since this is the inescapable, all-encompassing, reality of our brute existence, the inscription says we should worship and praise him. Emperor Augustus. And evidently, we cannot complement him enough. Evidently, his ego demands it. And if we cannot get with the program—and why wouldn't we?—there's good reason to be afraid. Or maybe, NOT TO BE AFRAID.

“... To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

You see, as much as I am so tempted to say that I've heard this before—and as much as you probably have heard this before—Luke's Gospel is actually mocking and making fun of the status quo. He's saying, ‘Do you think you've heard good news before? Do you think the so-called peace and prosperity of Caesar is all there is? Think again. Wonder again at this Impossible Possibility...’ And yes, this birth of God's Anointed is going to involve some fear; but it's not the typical fear we associate with violence or with catastrophes or with the lack of a social safety net or with financial bankruptcy. No, the fear is different. This fear is a response to the glory of the Lord. And this fear will be mingled with absolute joy.

Years ago I went skiing at the *Schweitzer Mountain* resort, and as my spouse, Sheryl, and I were riding the lift back up the steep, snowy slope, the whole apparatus transporting us came to an abrupt halt. And I remember swaying in the breeze with my heavy boots and my skis dangling about eighty feet off the ground. Sheryl then took the opportunity to spin around in her seat and notice the frozen lake in the distance. She then spun around to notice the silvery dusting of snow adorning the ponderosa pines. And I said, “Will you please stop? Stop moving! Sit still!” You see, with each jerky maneuver, it was as if I were slipping, or about to fall; and despite all the grandeur of the landscape and the beauty of the moment, I couldn't see that I was immersed in it, embedded in it, ensconced in it. I couldn't see and didn't want to see because of BEING AFRAID. But meanwhile, on Sheryl's face, joy... and for me, the possibility of joy!

“Then the angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid—for I am bringing you good news of great joy!’”

Now, this is really not a fair comparison. People become afraid for all sorts of reasons; and people overcome or manage their fears in all sorts of ways. Gareth Higgins wrote a book entitled, *How Not To Be Afraid*, in which he claims that fear is not unreasonable, and that as someone who grew up in Ireland, during the horrific bombings and gun violence that took place between Protestants and Catholics, he knows what it's like to be afraid for the right reasons and for the wrong reasons—and how religion itself can actually aggravate and augment our fears.

But then he writes this:

“There’s an old idea that the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. I’m going to risk suggesting that this idea has been fundamentally misunderstood. It doesn’t mean that there’s a Scary Bearded Guy in the sky who loves you so much that he will kill you if you don’t agree with him. It means that becoming wise begins with honoring reality...” [p. 6].

In other words, it begins with the experience of some very familiar relationships. And what we fear in those relationships is getting hurt. What we fear is losing something that might have brought us comfort and security. What we fear is being misunderstood. What we fear is being alone without anyone around us who really cares. And yet, none of those fears can exhaust the REALITY—the transcendent reality to which the angels are referring. And even if you don’t believe in actual angels, fluttering around in the night sky—even if you understand this whole story in Luke as a friendly mythology—there’s still MORE... isn’t there? Rudolph Otto, the philosopher who wrote *The Idea of the Holy*, claims there is such a thing as “a terrifying, overwhelming mystery that simultaneously draws and charms...” So, isn’t that at least possible? And isn’t it at least worth considering the possibility that you and I are being addressed by that Mystery?

The End of the Affair was written by Graham Greene, and it's the story of two illicit lovers during the World War Two bombings of Great Britain. Sarah says she loves Maurice, and Maurice loves Sarah. But when the sirens go off and the rendezvous where they're having sex is blown to bits, Sarah finds Maurice lifeless on the staircase. She's checks his pulse, listens for his heartbeat and observes the cessation of breath. And so, in a fearful panic, she returns to the bedroom, folds her hands and prays. She prays the prayer of an atheist—to *Anything that Might Exist*. And with an awkward sigh she says, “Please let him live. Let him live... Let him live...” and finally, “I'll give him up forever, but let him live.”

Now I mention this desperate prayer because of what happens next, and because it's consistent with the shepherds' experience of glory in the fields. Maurice ascends the stairs upon which he had collapsed in the bombing, and he lives. He lives! And what that means for Sarah is she has a choice to make. Is there merely a logical explanation? Something familiar? Or is she being addressed? Is she being *spoken to* by *Mystery*—by *THE MYSTERY*...?

“To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you...” And what is *a sign* exactly? A sign is communication. A sign is intentionality. A sign is an invitation to pay attention and to respond. And a sign confronts. It says, ‘*You may have an idea or a plan for your own individualized and egocentric life. You may want the safety and the security of a familiar job, familiar family, familiar friends, familiar food, familiar clothing, familiar music, familiar fun, familiar country, familiar religion. But here you are.*’ “***You will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.***”

Now maybe that's a little scary. Maybe, in some radically paradoxical way, that baby, cooing in the straw, is a little scary. But it's interesting to note how the shepherds have become more curious than afraid. They go. They go voluntarily, and not under the compulsion of some edict. Moreover, without their arrival at the scene, Mary and Joseph would have been left in the dark and in the lurch. It's the shepherds who have to tell them about the *glory* and the *joy*—and no emperor and no governor will have anything to say in the matter. In addition, rather than sitting back with a smug, self-satisfied expression on her face, Mary (in verse 19) *treasures* and *ponders* all these words—which is what I'll be asking you to do—TREASURE and PONDER THEM IN SILENCE.

Have you ever been afraid of the silence? I've heard it's God's first language. I've heard everything else is a poor translation. Are you afraid of the silence? Do not be afraid.

Do not be afraid of...