

1 Sermon, Christmas Eve 2013

Texts: Luke 2:1-20

1. Fear Not
2. Intimacy
3. Joy

1. Fear Not

What is it about Christmas that captures our imaginations? In the early church, they didn't celebrate Christmas at all. Easter was, and is, the central holiday of the Christian faith.

It is the power of Christ over death and sin that is the main reason for our faith. There is much more in the Bible about Christ's death and resurrection than about his birth.

So what is it about Christmas that captures our imagination? What is it about Christmas that warms our hearts, and makes us want to be generous, and makes us think of miracles?

Well...

Perhaps this story calms our fears. Despite everything, Christ is born.

Despite all that we've done to complicate it, Christmas is rather simple. The birth of a baby, even under the circumstances described in the gospels, even in a town far from home, even in a place where animals are fed – the birth of a baby is much more straightforward than the complicated fears and joys of death and resurrection.

The birth of a baby is the celebration of the one glorious moment when we receive a new life. In most cases, the demands are *predictable*. The baby needs milk, and needs its diaper changed. Birth is messy, but we know we have what we need to cope with it. As my wife, Marianne's great aunt told her, all you need to care for a baby is two strong arms.

Christmas is straightforward like that. It calms our fears, because it reminds us of one holy moment that is *understandable*. It's not like the cross, or the resurrection, which are amazing, but not so understandable.

2. Intimacy

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Christmas calms our fears.

We live in a fearful world. We're afraid of school shootings, so we need to be security conscious. We're afraid of Al Qaeda and terrorists, because we were attacked. Worse, we have become afraid of each other, and our politics is filled with fear of what the "other side" may do.

When we're afraid, things become battles. They're no longer negotiations or compromises. We lose respect, and people become enemies. We can get into permanent war mode in our relationships.

But here the Bible comes to our rescue. We read in the First Letter of John that "perfect love casts out fear."

When things become battles, the Christian "weapon" is love.

One of the aspects of love is intimacy. I'm not talking about anything sexual here. I'm talking about emotional closeness. Intimacy is that ability to confess your fears and your weaknesses and know that you will be accepted. In fact, you will be *appreciated* for your admitted fears and weaknesses. Intimacy is also the ability to accept the fears and weaknesses of others.

I'm sure you know *exactly* what I mean. I'm sure there have been times when you were at the end of your rope and you talked to someone who didn't laugh at you, but just listened. When that happened, your fears were calmed, you felt heard, and you became more hopeful.

Maybe you even shared your dreams with that person, and they supported you. Or vice versa. That's intimacy, and it does cast out fear.

That's part of the Christmas story, too.

What can be more intimate than the bond of a parent to her or his baby? There is, I think, no more intimate act than that of breastfeeding. There are few things more intimate than changing a diaper.

The Christmas angel spoke to the shepherds, saying "fear not."

The reason? God was coming close to them. God would be one of them. Today a savior is born *for you*. And the savior is close by – just in that city over there. Go and visit him.

Don't worry, that savior is accessible. He's born in a public place where even a smelly shepherd can go. After all, it's a place where animals feed. The baby is wrapped in rags, so don't be put off by thoughts that he's out of your class.

That's intimacy. Can God do anything more intimate than send a baby to be savior?

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3. Joy

When Jesus was born, an angel appeared to the shepherds and they were terrified. But the angel said to the Shepherds, "Fear not. I'm bringing you good news of great *joy*."

And then the whole area was filled with angels, singing joyfully: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

The shepherd's fear was turned to joy. The shepherds did as the angel told them. They went and visited baby Jesus, and then "they returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them."

Fear was turned to joy.

An example of fear turned to joy is found at l'arche communities around the world. L'arche is a ministry founded to care for people with severe handicaps. In the language of l'arche, these are called "core people," the people at the core of the ministry. Those who care for the core people are called "assistants."

Heather Bixler is an assistant at L'arche in Washington, DC, and wrote the following:

"Fritz, one of the core people, will at least once a day ask you, "Tired?" and he gets much pleasure out of responding to someone's sneeze with a hardy "BLESS you." Fritz has an amazing capacity to forgive and forget, as many in our house have witnessed.

"Just today, after much difficulty with morning routine and other dreaded tasks, I sat down feeling rather defeated, only to have Fritz come and join me on the couch, placing a hand on my shoulder and saying, "You're a nice girl." Just the assurance I needed!

"Fritz and other core members in our house, are born counter-cultural. Their bodies and minds don't fit neatly into the mainstream understanding of what it means to be a person of worth. But through their daily acts of love and acceptance, my housemates have become my guides, pointing me towards the joy and promise of the Kingdom."

Most volunteers at l'arche start out fearful. Will I be able to handle living with people so different from me? Will I be up to the tasks? Will I be judgmental and embarrass myself?

But time spent at l'arche, while difficult, leads to joy, and a discovery of the kingdom of God at work in the small things

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Christmas is the story of fear turned to joy. The joy is not because of the angels. The joy is because of the baby Jesus, born humble and lowly. Joy is in the simple things. Joy is there despite the challenges and hardships. And joy overcomes fear.

Behold--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.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

"In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an 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 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. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them." Luke 2:1-20, NRSV.