

The Real Message Of Christmas

Matthew 1:20-21; Luke 1:29-37; Luke 2:9-14

Can you count the number of times that fear has gripped you? It may have been something you could pin-point, and name, or it may have been what is commonly called a “nameless fear.” You didn’t know why you were afraid, or what was causing it, but you knew you were afraid.

That fear kept you awake at night. You thought about it all during the day. It soon began to affect everything you did. And no matter *what* you did, that fear wouldn’t go away. It just wouldn’t leave.

Fear takes many forms. We’re afraid of a lot of things, including things surrounding Christmas. There is even an official name for the fear of Christmas trees, a very real phobia that is a subset of dendrophobia, the fear of trees. There are websites on the Internet dedicated to exploring the various kinds of fears that people deal with every day of their lives. Fear is a very real thing, and can control a person’s entire life.

It may seem rather odd to be talking about fear here at Christmastime. But there was a message spoken by the angel of the Lord in the events surrounding the birth of Christ. It was so important a message that it was repeated several times, almost as if God wanted to emphasize this message to us. God wanted to be sure that we heard these words, so He says the same thing over and over to us.

No, it isn’t “*He shall save His people from their sins,*” though that is an important message. It wasn’t “*Where is He who has been born to be King of the Jews?*” though that was an important question. It wasn’t even “*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men,*” though that is “*good news of great joy.*” This is the message God emphasized to those present at the birth of His Son, Jesus: “*Fear not.*”

That’s right! Four times in the events surrounding the birth of Christ, God spoke through His angel and said, “*Fear not.*” And I believe that to us today God is trying to speak, and that what He says to us through the birth of His Son Jesus is “*fear not.*” We’ve skimmed over that message, and we are so caught up in everything else that we don’t hear those words anymore. But if you will read the Gospel accounts in Matthew and Luke, you will find that God’s angel spoke to everyone to whom he appeared, and told them “*fear not!*”

Can Christmas really make that much difference?

What was there about that first Christmas that would cause the angel to say that? And what is there about the birth of Christ into our world that chases away fear from our worlds and from our personal lives?

If the message “fear not” was so important that God would have His angel say it four times, then perhaps it is important enough for us to look at it a little closer. Why is the real message of Christmas, “*Fear not*”?

1 Because the birth of Christ shows us God’s Purpose, Matthew 1:20-21

In Matthew’s Gospel, we find that Mary is betrothed to Joseph. Among the ancient Jews, marriage consisted of three stages: engagement, betrothal, and marriage. The engagement was usually arranged by the parents while the children were very young, or by a professional matchmaker. The betrothal period was next, and usually lasted for one year. During that time the girl lived with her parents, but the couple was looked upon as being husband and wife. During the stage of betrothal, unfaithfulness was regarded the same as adultery. After that one year was over, the marriage was completed, and the bride went to live with her husband.

It was during this period of betrothal, the Scripture says, that Mary was found to be with a child. What a shock that must have been to Joseph! It must have looked to him as though she had been unfaithful to him. There were two things he could do. One, he could make her a public example, but the Law said that she would then die by stoning. I believe that Joseph loved Mary too much to allow that to happen to her, so he chose his second option. He chose to divorce her quietly, secretly.

One night, as Joseph tossed and turned on his bed, trying to decide what to do, God sent an angel to speak to Joseph in a dream. There are 122 times in the Scriptures when God spoke His Word to people through dreams, and that is what He does to Joseph.

The angel said, “*Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary as your wife.*” Fear not! And then the angel went on to explain that Joseph would not have to be afraid because God had a purpose. In the first place, Mary had not been unfaithful. In fact, it was her faithfulness to God that resulted in her being chosen to be the mother of the Messiah. Second, God had a purpose in causing Joseph and Mary this turmoil. God had a purpose in causing them to risk their reputations this

way. The angel said, “Stop being afraid,” because Joseph *was* afraid. But then the angel revealed God’s purpose to Joseph, and said, “*She will bring forth a son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.*” God revealed the mystery of His purpose to Joseph. No one else knew that, not even Mary. God was invading human history to redeem His people. That was His purpose, and knowing God’s purpose stilled the fear and doubt inside Joseph’s heart.

That is exactly what the birth of Christ means to us today. Because God had a purpose when He sent His Son, we can have our fears calmed. God speaks to our doubt and says, “Fear not! I’ve got a purpose in all this.” We are reminded of God’s purpose every year at Christmas.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon said once, “Christ is the great central fact in the world’s history. To Him everything looks forward or backward. All the lines of history converge upon Him. All the great purposes of God culminate in Him. The greatest and most momentous fact which the history of the world records is the fact of His birth.”

From the very beginning, God’s purpose in sending His Son was to provide salvation for us. “*Thou shalt call His name Jesus, for He shall save His people from their sins.*” Amy Carmichael has said, “The cross always stands near the manger.” Henry G. Bosch wrote, “Unless we see the Cross overshadowing the Cradle, we have lost the real meaning of Christ’s birth!” Christ wasn’t born to live; He was born to die, and to live again! That was the only way He could save His people from their sins.

What did Jesus Himself say about His purpose? His words are recorded for us. In Matthew 20:28 He said, “*The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.*” Luke 19:10—“*For the Son of Man came to seek and to save that which was lost.*” John 3:17—“*For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.*”

And Paul wrote to Timothy: “*This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners...*” (1 Timothy 1:15).

That is why we don’t need to be afraid anymore! God’s purpose in sending His Son is to provide us with a way out, an escape from all the “*sin and doubt which so*

easily besets us.” God says, “I’ve got a purpose, and my purpose is that through my Son Jesus Christ, you can have eternal life. You can have abundant life. You can have all riches in glory through My Son Jesus. Fear not!”

2 **Because the Birth of Christ shows us God’s Promise,** **Luke 1:29-37**

We’re all familiar with the way the angel appeared to Mary, and said, *“Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!”* The next verse says, *“But when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying.”* The angel’s next words to Mary were *“Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.”* And then the angel went on to explain to Mary that God’s promise that He would one day send a Messiah was about to be fulfilled, and that she was the chosen one who would give birth to the Savior.

As the angel told it to Mary, the promise had three parts to it: (1) You shall conceive and bear a son. His name is to be Jesus. (2) He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Most High. (3) As a King on David’s throne, He shall reign over the house of Jacob forever.

For centuries, the Jewish people had been waiting for the birth of the Messiah. Every Jewish mother hoped and prayed that her son would be the Messiah. The entire Old Testament is lit up with the preparation for Christ’s birth, beginning with Genesis 3:15. What God’s message meant to Mary was this: “Mary, I have given the world a promise that a Savior would be born of a virgin. You are that virgin. Your son will be the Son of the Most High God. I’ve promised that He would reign on David’s throne forever, and that He will. Mary, this is My promise to the world for all ages.”

What does that mean for us? How does Christmas show us God’s Promise? Because Jesus is the Promise fulfilled. We all know people who have broken their promises, and perhaps we’ve broken a few ourselves. But God made a promise that one day He would send a Savior into the world, and when He sent His Son Jesus to be that Savior, then the promise was fulfilled, because Jesus is the One who provides us with salvation. This is exciting, but when you compare Scripture with Scripture, a light begins to shine in our hearts.

When you go back to Isaiah 43:1, you read these words of comfort: *“Fear not, for I have redeemed thee.”* There in the Old Testament was the first hint that we would not have to be afraid anymore, because God entered human history to

redeem His people. But three passages in particular in the New Testament sound the message clearly and plainly. First is 2 Corinthians 1:20, where Paul is writing about Jesus: *“For all the promises of God in Him [Jesus] are Yes, and in Him Amen, to the glory of God through us.”* In other words, the promises of God all converge in Jesus.

Second Peter 1:4 is another. Again, the writer is speaking about Jesus: *“By Him we have been given exceedingly great and precious promises, that through Jesus you may be partakers of the divine nature...”* What that verse is saying is that the ultimate promise in Jesus is that through Him we might be one with God. We can have eternal life through the Promise of a Savior! And that is why we don’t have to be afraid anymore. That is why our fears should no longer have dominion over us. Fear not!

One more verse, this time from 1 John 2:25—*“And this is the promise that He has promised us—eternal life.”* There it is, plain and simple. Jesus is the Promise, because Jesus is the One who provides us with eternal life. If we really want it, He is the One who dispels fear and gloom and doubt. He is the One Who conquered death! Jesus is the Promise, and we don’t have to be afraid, anymore!

A young Hindu priest went to the home of a missionary in Calcutta to ask him some questions. In the course of their conversation, the young man said, “There are many things which Christianity contains that I can find in Hinduism; but there is one thing which Christianity has that Hinduism does not have.” The missionary asked, “What is that?” His reply illustrates the point we are making today: “The one thing which Christianity has that Hinduism does not have is a Savior.”

Jesus is the Promise of God to you, personally, that you, by inviting Him into your heart, and giving Him complete control of your life, can have eternal life. You can be a “partaker of the Divine nature.”

3 **Because the birth of Christ shows us God’s Presence,** **Luke 2:9-14**

The shepherds, out in the countryside, are suddenly confronted by an angel of the Lord, who said, *“Fear not, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people.”* Don’t be afraid, he said to them, because God is coming to be with you. *“For unto you is born this day in the City of David, a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.”*

Those shepherds were terrified at the presence of an angel because they may have thought that he was coming to bring judgment upon them. When the glory of the Lord shone around them, they were very much afraid. God's presence with them there that night caused fear to come into their hearts. That is why the angel said, "*Fear not.*" But their reaction is similar to the way many of us would react today, because many of us are afraid of the presence of God.

When the angel told them to stop being afraid, not only was their terror soothed, but the angel's words had a deeper meaning as well. "*Fear not, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy.*" What were those good tidings? "*There is born to you this day a Savior.*" God has come into your world! From here on, the world will be a different place—your lives will be different—because you have the presence of God with you. If we remember the angel's word to Joseph in Matthew 1, we'll recall that Joseph was told the baby's name was to be "Immanuel," which means, you remember, "*God with us.*" And when Jesus was born, that was the time, that was the moment in history, when God became one of us.

And even though Jesus was crucified and rose again, and then ascended to the Father, we today still have the presence of God with us through the Holy Spirit. Stop being afraid—*fear not!*—God is with you.

In the Old Testament, God promised His presence to His people, and told them that because of that, they didn't need to be afraid anymore. "*Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed for I am your God. I will strengthen you, Yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand*" (Isaiah 41:10). God's presence makes the difference! That is why we don't have to be afraid anymore.

Jesus spoke about this: "*For where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them*" (Matthew 18:20). And Jesus wanted us to be always be aware of His presence with us, for in some of the last words He said to His disciples, He assured them: "*and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the age*" (Matthew 28:20).

Because Christ was born, we have the presence of God! And not only that, but the Bible promises us that because Christ was born, we are all allowed to be in the Presence of God ourselves. It works both ways. You remember the words of Christ to the thief on the cross: "*Today you will be with me in paradise*" (Luke 23:43). And Jesus had already told His disciples in John 14, "*Let not your heart be troubled.*" In other words, don't be afraid! Why? Because Jesus was going back to the Father, and there He would prepare a place for us. Don't be afraid, because we

are going to be together forever. “*And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you to myself; that where I am, there you may be also*” (John 14:3)

But wait! It gets better! Paul was writing about the return of the Lord Jesus in 1 Thessalonians 4:17—“*Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus **we shall always be with the Lord.***” All that because Jesus was born as a baby in Bethlehem!

Harry Ironside was a wonderful preacher of another generation. He served as pastor of the great Moody Church in Chicago for 18 years. He and his son used to play a game at home they called “Bears.” Ironside would be the great, big, bad bear, and he would chase his little boy through the house. One day the little boy was backed up into a corner, so he hid his face in fright. Suddenly he dropped his little hands, looked up at his father and said, “I’m not afraid of you! You’re not a bear—you’re my daddy!”

We may feel as if we are being chased all over the place, when suddenly we find ourselves cornered. We just need to look up and realize that God is our “daddy,” and He is with us, and we don’t have to be afraid anymore.

There’s a comic strip called “Hagar the Horrible,” which was created by Dik Browne several years ago. His son Chris has now taken it over. One year Christmas fell on a Sunday, and the “Hagar the Horrible” comic strip that day featured Hagar’s son seated on a boulder with a monk, and the son is looking at the people celebrating the Christmas holiday. He says, “I love this time of year. Everyone is so happy and kind and giving. Everything is so peaceful. It’s like a whole different world! And look! That star was never there before!”

The monk looks and says, “Oh, no. It’s there all the time. It’s just that most people can only see it at Christmas time.”

God’s presence is with us all the time, not just at Christmas, but many times we cannot see it. The presence of God was made available to us when Jesus was born. “*Fear not, for unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.*”

So this Christmas, are you aware of God’s purpose? Do you know God’s promise, as it was fulfilled through His Son? Is God present in your life? The word of God

to you today is *“Fear not! Jesus has been born! God has entered the world—and you don’t have to be afraid, anymore!!”*

*12.19.1982, AM—Friendship Baptist Church, McComb, Mississippi
12.08.1985, AM—Clarksdale Baptist Church, Clarksdale, Mississippi
12.23.1990, AM—Hillcrest Baptist Church, Jackson, Mississippi
12.13.1998, AM—Bethlehem Baptist Church, Benton, Mississippi
12.24.2006, AM—Bethlehem Baptist Church, Benton, Mississippi
12.12.2010, AM—Utica Baptist Church, Utica, Mississippi*