

Zephaniah 3: 14-20
Luke 3: 7-18
Creekside COB
December 17, 2006
The Third Sunday in Advent

“Love Is Not Afraid”

There is a story about a gospel event that does not appear in the Gospels. A man who was present when Jesus fed a multitude with five loaves of bread and two fish came up to Jesus the next day and asked, “Lord, after everyone ate their fill of bread and fish, you told your disciples, ‘Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.’ What are the fragments that must be gathered up so that nothing will be lost?” Jesus replied, *“The fragments are your fears, which multiply like the loaves and fishes and fill more baskets than you can carry by yourself. These must not be lost. Instead, they must be brought to me, so that I may bear them with you. In this way, nothing that is part of you will be left unfound.”*

Fear is not the emotion we associate with Christmas, unless it’s the fear of not finding a present for everyone on your list, or the fear not getting the house cleaned before the family throng arrives on Christmas day. Christmas is a refuge where we hide from the fears that hound us, if only for a little while. But the irony is that the birth, which released us from our sins and fears, was itself the cause of great fear.

Zechariah was afraid when an angel appeared to him and said that his wife Elizabeth would bear a son named John, even though they were both members of the AARP. Mary was afraid when an angel Gabriel told her that she would give birth to “the Son of the Most High.” Mary was afraid to tell Joseph she was pregnant, and that God was the father. Joseph contemplated divorcing Mary, but he feared what would happen to her. Out of love for Mary and a dream telling him not to fear taking her for his wife, Joseph remained with her. When King Herod heard that

a new king was born, he and all of Jerusalem was afraid, and steps were taken to dispatch the little king that Herod saw as a threat to his throne.

Christmas is not a refuge from fear. The child born in Bethlehem is the Lord who takes our fears from us and bears them for us. But before we celebrate the birth that met our hopes and fears, we must listen to a man and his fearful message.

“You sack of snakes! Who warned you to run for your lives from the judgment?” It was obvious that John the Baptist didn’t learn to preach at an accredited seminary. He didn’t try to build rapport and identify with them before engaging them with the message. He went right for their throats.

“It looks like we’ve got some worthless trees in this orchard, siphoning nutrients from the soil and not producing fruit. Look at those scraggly Christmas trees. Most of their needles are gone and the branches couldn’t hold up an ornament. Chop them down and throw them into the fire—every one of them. And the winnowing fork will separate the wheat from the chaff, and the chaff will burn in an unquenchable fire.”

John sounds more like a lowbrow, Bible-belt Baptist radio preacher than an educated, cultured preacher who would appeal to people’s intellects instead of exploiting their fears. Here, Luke inserts a comment here that sounds odd. “With many other exhortations, he preached good news to the people.” Good news? The prospects of getting pitched into unquenchable fire does not strike me as particularly good news.

I guess it depends on where you stand. If you were a Jew listening to John, you would have relished the thought your Roman oppressors roasting in hell. Read it to people in the Darfur region of Sudan who suffer from the war of genocide perpetrated against them. The thought of the divine justice awaiting their oppressors would be good news. If we were honest, we would admit wanting to see bad people burn with the barren trees and chaff. Part of us likes it when Clint Eastwood rides his horse into town to blow away the bad guys.

One summer when I was home from college, a dozen or so of my buddies went to Angelo's Pizza on Monday nights—after hours. A couple of our comrades worked there, and we had an “arrangement” wherein we made our own pizzas for one dollar a head, drinks included. A guy named Moe Mozier owned Angelo's, and we asked our friend, “Soup” if Moe knew what we were doing. Soup said, “Don't worry about it,” so we didn't. But the following Monday at around midnight as we were enjoying ourselves immensely, Soup hollered, “Moe just pulled in!! Out of the kitchen! Sit down and empty your wallets!”

Moe walked in and saw our, “hand-in-the-cookie-jar looks.” In a nervous voice, someone said, “How's it goin', Moe?” Moe replied, “I don't know... maybe you can tell *me* how it's goin.”

That was the end of Monday night at Angelo's. Soup didn't lose his job, and we took up a voluntary collection to offset expenses. It happened thirty-three years ago, but I can still feel it—standing scared before the judgment throne with no defense, awaiting sentencing. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees that don't produce. His winnowing fork is in his hand to separate the wheat from the chaff.

Scary, isn't it? It's not good news to our ears... or is it? When John the Baptist was asked if he was the Christ, he said that he was paving the way for someone mightier than he was. When Jesus came, he was not what John expected. He sent his disciples to Jesus and asked, *as if he wasn't sure*, “Are the one who was promised, or should we be waiting for someone else?”

Jesus didn't call his listeners, “a brood of vipers.” He did not come announcing the “kingdom of hell.” He proclaimed the kingdom of God that had love at the heart of it-- not terror. “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son. God so loved the world that his will is not that anyone should perish.”

A theologian said, “The coming of the one whom John calls ‘more mighty than I,’ calls into judgment every future that is projected apart from the will and way of Jesus.”

I learned things about myself when I spent two weeks alone in the Ontario wilderness. I learned about fear. The little cabin I stayed in was perched on a beautiful point of land jutting out into a lake, but when the sun set, and the darkness settled in, serenity went into hiding, and anxiety crept in. The place that was so peaceful during the day turned menacing after dark. The trees turned into silhouettes of monsters. Sounds of the forests were haunting. I heard sticks crack and was sure it was a bear that followed the smell of the fish I was frying. What if there really was such a creature as a Sawsquatch and it was watching me through the window? What if cut a gash in my leg while chopping wood? What if I get stranded on the lake and I'm blown to the far side with no way to get back? What if I have an aneurism or a heart attack? What if I'm struck by lightning? The closest people are fifteen miles away.

The dark is a canvass upon which we draw the fears that roam in our minds. If there is nothing specific to fear, we will make something up. Sometimes it's fear in general. Sometimes it is concise. What if I get a bad report from the doctor tomorrow? What if I lose my job? What if I don't have enough money to retire on? What if Iran gets the bomb? What if an asteroid hits the earth? It could happen. What if? What if?

Fear cripples us and prevents us from living lives that God desires. Time spent worrying about the future, our safety, our health, what might happen to loved ones, what others think of us may do to us, is time we steal from ourselves.

In the year 1360, Catherine of Siena warned against giving into fear of critics and our real or perceived enemies. She said that such fear is characteristic of those who hope only in themselves, and not in God. "The coming of the one John calls 'more mighty than I,' calls into judgment every future that is projected apart from the will and way of Jesus." Advent reminds us to question every future that is apart from the will of God-- the future that we want, the future the Administration wants, or the future that Al Quida wants.

The judgment that Jesus brought into the world does not have holy terror at the heart of it. What is at its heart is holy fear. It is to bow before God in absolute awe of his power and our frailty. It is being overwhelmed by our sin in the light of God's mercy. It is the fear of the Lord

Catherine of Siena said that when holy fear grasps us, problems and people and powers can't jerk us around any more. (That's my paraphrase.) Holy fear knows that God is love and that God's love isn't merely interesting or nice. God is not our "buddy" whose love is a quaint concept we play with in Sunday school. God's love is a fire that burns away our impurities. It is an earthquake that shakes us silly. Someone said, "Love is what banged out the big bang in the beginning and love is what went to hell for us on the cross."

We could all stand a big dose of holy fear for Christmas. It's not the fear that makes you roll up in the fetal position. Holy fear sets us free to love God and our neighbor. When the people heard John's warning, they asked, "What then shall we do?" He didn't tell them to catch the Christmas spirit, or make themselves feel good by giving the deserving poor a food basket.

John told them to put their fear to work. "If you have two coats, give on the one who has none. Give food to those who don't have any. Do justice and love kindness.

Let us pick up the fragments that are the fears that multiply and fragment our lives. Put the fragments into the baskets and carry them to Jesus so he can bear them for us. Let's let go of the crippling terror of the God of wrath that keeps us away from him. Let's approach him with appropriate fear and trembling, trusting that God is good and loving. It is only then that we can grow as Christians. Julian of Norwich said it best:

"For when we fear God reverently and love God meekly, our trust is never in vain. Fear not, I am with thee."