
Heart and Soul ... A Weekly Meditation

December 15, 2013

Fear at Christmas

“Don’t fear, Zion. Don’t let your hands fall. The Lord your God is in your midst.”
Zephaniah 3:16, 17 (Common English Bible)

Often today you hear Christians express dismay that Christ is frequently left out of Christmas. While that may be true there is something that is more surprising – there is a noticeable absence of fear during this season. Not the everyday fears we all wrestle with, the fear of spending far more than our resources permit, the fear that holiday guests will misbehave toward one another when they gather and fear what the New Year holds for aging parents. Naturally, these are important but not the fears that keep popping-up in the Bible around the Christmas story. No, the fears that ripple-out from the pages of the Bible have to do with what God is up to and what that means for our lives.

The fear spoken of here in this passage from Zephaniah has to do with the fear of being punished. The people had no illusion that they were guilt free. They had broken promises with one another and with God. Simply, they were not the people God called them to be. So when God suddenly shows up, there is apprehension over God’s response. The prophet Zephaniah announces that God has forgiven the people their sins and totally removed their guilt. More, Zephaniah shares a little later in this verse that God comes rejoicing and singing from the depths of God’s love for us.

Then there is the fear by nearly every member of the original Christmas cast; the fear that God appearing means a disruption of their lives. Pay attention to the Christmas story in Matthew’s Gospel and you see an angel telling Joseph not to be afraid. Read the Christmas story in Luke’s Gospel and an angel tells Mary not to be afraid. Later in Luke’s Gospel, an angel appears to shepherds and they were terrified. There is fear all over the Christmas story. Where is that fear today during the holiday season?

Seldom is the hardness of the life we have with Jesus frankly acknowledged anymore. Many have conveniently forgotten – or ignored – that the coming of Jesus means that God intends to disrupt our little life plans. Christmas very simply means that we are not on our own any more to do with our lives as we please. The birth of Christ means that we are called to embark upon a hazardous and straining enterprise, one where absolutely nothing is going to be the same any more. If this is properly understood, there would be considerably more fear at Christmas throughout the church. Such fear would demonstrate that the Church really understands what is going on. Perhaps the reason the Church has so few experiences with angels appearing is because there is so little fear.

This Christmas, O Lord, help us to surrender our little life plans that we may live fully into Your purposes for us. In Christ’s Name, we ask, Amen.

Doug Hood