

Pastor T.C. Arnold  
4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Advent  
Luke 1:39-56  
December 21<sup>st</sup>, 2014

We all know what it's like to have someone suddenly pop out at us, scare us and make us almost jump out of our skin. If our friends do this at Halloween, it's funny. If they do it at Christmas, well, it might mean they are just being a jerk. However, fear is evoked many different times in the Bible – usually by a sudden appearance of an angel or maybe even the Lord Himself. From Moses through the prophets we hear about this. We even hear about “fear” when the angel came to Mary to make a splendid, life changing, world altering announcement. As Gabriel appeared to Mary, he said, “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” Next, he says, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And you will conceive in your womb and bear a son...”

“The fear of the Lord” is a key concept throughout the Bible. In the Old Testament the word fear is Yir'ah. Unfortunately this word does not communicate itself through any single word in English. So, what happens is that this word often means “various” things instead of just one thing. For example, for us, the word fear often has a negative connotation, namely to be afraid. The Hebrew term can mean that. When Jacob prepared to meet his brother Esau, he feared. Jacob had fled from Esau years before because he had tricked him out of his birthright. Jacob prayed to God, “Please deliver me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I fear him, for he may come and attack me...” (Gen 32:11).

But the word fear can have other shades of meaning as well. When referring to a person of high position, it takes on the idea of standing in awe or reverence before that individual. God wants us to fear Him in this sense. He is our Creator and He is our Savior. How can we ever think of God with indifference or treat Him lightly? Proverbs says that true wisdom begins with such fear. The very first chapter in Proverbs sums up the entire book when it says, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; fools despise wisdom and instruction.” The idea of “fearing” God in terms of respect and reverence like this occurs at least twenty different times in Proverbs alone.

Fear is closely related to trust because we can truly respect and reverence God only when we believe that He is truly everything that His Word, says He is. Understanding “fear of the Lord” as trust helps us to understand other strange Bible passages like Psalm 130 when it says, “[Lord] with You there is forgiveness, therefore, you are feared.” Lord, you are revered and respected and we trust that your Word delivers what you promise – forgiveness.

And that is why Mary's song sounds like this: “... for He who is mighty has done great things for me and holy is His name. And His mercy is for those who **fear** Him from generation to generation.” No, not mercy for those who are afraid of God. Rather, mercy for those who fear Him... that is, revere, respect and trust in the Lord. Beloved in the Lord, the faithful, those who approach God as the Lord, those who believe on Him, trust in Him and are called His very own can be confident that His mercy is for them. That means, God's mercy is for you.

With Christmas, we are about to embark on the season of mercy. Two questions I would like to ask about mercy: Why so? and how so? First of all, the “Why so?” Why would God be merciful to His creation? Why be merciful to you? Do you deserve it? No. Do you need it? Yes. Does He love you? Absolutely yes. God is so merciful that He gave His law. The law is a mirror. We look into it and we see that we do not measure up. The law shows us our sins, where we have fallen short, where we need to amend our lives, where we need to stop and turn around, where the Lord would want us to be. The law accuses us and all of us stand condemned. It shows us just how much we need the Gospel part of the Lord's mercy. The “Why so” is because you cannot save yourself because of your sin. The “Why so” is because you need Him, so He came, right alongside of you.

How so? Well, what in the world is more considerate than to come alongside of those we love in days such as these? I'm not talking about Holiday days. I'm speaking of, these last days – these days of suffering – these days when our hearts sink into our stomachs more than being filled with joy and gladness – these days when we need our friends to prop us up when times are tough. What describes mercy better than when we are hungry and someone is there to give us food – when we are injured and someone is there to bind our wounds – when we are sad and someone is there to be a shoulder to cry on? That is why, beloved in the Lord, the incarnation of our Savior Jesus, the gift a child at Bethlehem, is the greatest act of mercy this world has ever seen. God put on flesh and dwelt among His people. He came to be beside them, feeding them, binding their wounds and was that shoulder to cry on when suffering became too much.

He still is today. Beloved we are not talking about an anticipation of Christmas that happened 2000 years ago. We live in the here and now. We need a Lord that is with us now – right now – today and each of our days. We have a Lord who is with us in each of these words of comfort in the consoling embrace of your neighbor, and in each promise of deliverance that our Lord spoke and is still valid for us today. The incarnation of Jesus, Him becoming our neighbor, our friend, is as much for you and me today as it was for those shepherds and townsfolk and the dignitaries and even the prostitutes in the highways and byways of Jerusalem and beyond in an age long past. Today we have a merciful comforter. Today we have a redeemer.

Mercy from the one who is feared always has to be present tense – or it's not mercy. I know, life still hurts. Damage has been done. This world and all its misgivings and those who have disappointed you have made you feel as if God's mercy is too far off. God's presence has come to us today and His ministry of mercy works through you who are alongside of your fellow believers.

Martin Niemoeller was a German pastor who was very outspoken against the Nazi regime during WWII. He once gave the perfect real-life illustration of how the mercy of God works through our neighbor. He once said, "First the Nazis came for the communists, I did not speak up for them because I was not a communist. When they came for the Jews, I did not speak up because I was not a Jew. When they came for the trade unionists, I did not speak up because I was not a trade unionist. When they came for the Catholics, I did not speak up because I was a Lutheran. And then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak for me."

*"And His mercy is for those who fear Him..."* Mercy, O Lord, is what we need. What we need is what we have – a Lord who comes alongside of His people. What more is there to respect than to have a Lord who comes alongside of you and me. That doesn't mean suffering and pain will cease. But it does mean this – *"Never will I leave you and never will I forsake you."* It means mercy is poured out on you when it counts the most – that day when you need it the most. I'm talking about that last day. See how God had connected the beginning – a little baby – with the eternal – heaven for you and me. May the Lord richly bless you and keep you as we venture now into the Christmas season with fear, trust, and most of all Mercy from our Heavenly Father. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.  
Amen.