

“Fear Not”

Sermon December 24, 2008

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“O Little Town of Bethlehem!” That little town of Bethlehem has certainly changed since a Monsignor and I from an ecumenical delegation to Israel paid \$25 for a taxi ride from Jerusalem to Bethlehem in 1981 to share in a celebration of a mass in the Church of the Nativity.

It has certainly changed even more since Episcopal Bishop Phillips Brooks assisted in a midnight service there on Christmas Eve, 1865. His inspiration, born that night in the church where St. Luke records that Jesus was born, resulted in the words of the now-famous Christmas carol we sang tonight, about the quiet village in whose “dark streets shineth the everlasting Light.” In an area now constantly surrounded by Palestinian security police it can be hard now to see that Light of peace on Christmas night. Nevertheless, Christian pilgrims sing there as we do in Potomac, Maryland this Christmas Eve, “the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”

In these lyrics Phillips Brooks was suggesting that the birth of Jesus is the meeting point for our hopes and our fears. Other poets—like Shelley and Browning—had written earlier about hopes and fears being joined together, as had the psalmists. So in Brooks' inspiration, when a mighty dread overtook the troubled minds of the Judean shepherds, as they tried to understand, just as we do, what is happening to our world when Jesus is born, the voice of the Angel of the Lord rang out, “Do not be afraid!”

Somehow it's hard to imagine an angel proclaiming this Christmas, “Do not be afraid, fear not.” In a world where we thought we had gotten use to the rapid pace of change, what has happened in our financial world, bursting finally full-blown into all the news headlines only about four months ago, has given “uncertainty” and “turbulence” really bad names! I don't know a single family, my own or others, where one generation or both have not been affected by what is happening around the globe.

And along with that, we still have the **deeper** fears of millions of Americans and our fellow travelers on this—as TIME magazine expressed it— this intricate, interdependent, interwoven, intensely dangerous world. It's not just the possibility of

nuclear proliferation or the certainty of global warming; it can be fear of any stranger, fear of the new, or anxiety even about the next day.

But now, before just saying as the angels did, “Don’t be afraid, fear not”, or lighting candles and caroling away the reality of fear, we would do well to remember the first principle I read in a little book, “Common Sense and World Affairs.” “To know when to be afraid is the beginning of wisdom.” For animals and birds, the instinct of fear is essential for self-preservation. For human beings too, knowing when to be scared is a requirement of survival. And sometimes the Church in its prophetic role must warn the world of danger.

But fear cannot be allowed to dominate our lives. Unrestrained fear is a terriblecrippler of mind and spirit. The philosopher Montaigne said centuries ago, “The thing I am most afraid of is *fear*.” The poet Robert Frost put it this way, “there is nothing I am afraid of like scared people.” And now Franklin Roosevelt’s appeal in his presidential inaugural address seventy-five years ago is being quoted frequently. In the depths of a truly global economic depression, he called us to overcome “nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.” For, he concluded in unforgettable and ringing tones we want to hear again, the “only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”

Fear does not always leap from great public happenings and changes into our private lives. We can ignore much of that or say we do. Much of the time our fears are concealed and are very personal, not always admitted to ourselves. We are fearful of pain, of loneliness, of failure, of the passing of familiar traditions, of the opinions of others, of growing older, of death. But these private fears are not without consequences. They may, in fact, make us more vulnerable in the face of swift social and political changes and currents we frequently don’t understand and most of the time we cannot change.

I believe that the famous Serenity Prayer, “to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference” is one that we all should pray in times like these. And beyond that on this Christmas Eve of 2008 I think there is no greater summons to the Church of Jesus Christ than to bring spiritual confidence and hope, by being what we called to be, a **community for the transcendence of fear**.

This is not the denial of fear, for fear is a very human, and at times, evens a very necessary thing; nor is it the escape from fear, for that not a test of faith. *A community for the transcendence of fear* lives by engagement, contact, and involvement—not by insulating us by church walls or isolating us from the public arena.

Life is involvement, engagement, and dialogue. And even those who think they are the most radically committed to Christ need a dialogue between fear and faith, to live day by day into the reality that Christian hope was made flesh that Christmas night, and is born again, as **faith overcomes fear**.

From that dialogue between fear and faith we can grow in confidence that in the birth of Jesus we have a hope that cannot be overcome. Again and again, Jesus' echoes the angel's voice heard on the night he was born. Again and again, across and through the turbulent storms of life, then and now, he comes to say, "Take heart, it is I; be not afraid."

And to those who will fret away the precious possibilities in the present to worry over the uncertainties of the future, he will always say, "Do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself."

And in every event, in every year his voice can be heard saying, "let not your heart be troubled, neither be afraid." "Be of good cheer! I have overcome the world!"

From that faith Phillips Brooks wrote 143 years ago, "the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." And that is why we come together at the altar tonight at the end of a troubled 2008, offering up our fears as a community of hope, as a *community for the transcendence of fear*, to receive once again his living presence among us, strengthened by that presence so that we can really live into the coming of a truly New Year! AMEN