

When Jesus Came, Humanity Changed
Luke 1:39-45

“Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light; the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”

The line, of course, is from the Christmas carol, “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” the song we just sang. Who here doesn’t cherish the image of light beaming down upon the little town of Bethlehem, on the shabby stable where the Christ child dozes away, oblivious to the drama, the tensions of the world? Who doesn’t celebrate the joy his birth brings to a world where joy so often seems in short supply?...But what about the fears mentioned in this hymn? What does fear have to do with Christmas?

The history of the carol provides a hint. “O Little Town of Bethlehem” was written in 1868 by the Episcopal preacher Phillips Brooks. The Civil War had ended only three years earlier. General Lee and General Grant had signed their peace accord at Appomattox and shaken hands on the deal. Battle-weary veterans from both sides had laid down their arms and trudged home. However, half the nation was still in ruins, and the country struggled to rebuild and reunite. Peace was just as challenging and trying as the war.

On the home front of both north and south, families had been decimated by the bloodshed, the annihilation of the most brutal war America had ever known. Families counted themselves lucky if their soldiers had come home only lacking an arm or a leg or an eye or shivering with PTSD. They knew their family member could easily have not come home at all. So, in 1868, the Christmas carol gave Americans some measure of peace and tranquility to imagine the humble Bethlehem stable as the place where hope and fear meet each other - and where joy emerges as the ultimate victor. It was a reminder from Phillips Brooks that if Jesus came, humanity would change...

At the same time, there's more fear in the Advent and Christmas stories than most of us care to be reminded of. It's unmistakably present in John's fiery preaching, of course, but we see it also in the angel's repeated greeting: "Fear not." Yes, the angel says not to be afraid. The mere fact that such an urging needs to be said at all is an admission that fear is an ever-present reality - both then and now...However, we just don't get that in the secular version of the Christmas holiday. It's all light and no shadow, all merriment - no hostility, no hatred. As for those who turn for even just a moment from the relentless "Christmas cheer" to acknowledge some all-too-human problem or difficulty, they might be accused of lacking sufficient "Christmas spirit".

Obviously, John the Baptist wants no part of such an "all cheery world" - neither do the gospel-writers, as they record the Christmas story with angels who preface good news with "Fear not," on one side, and with the soldiers of a jealous king who threatens to kill all the young boys in Bethlehem, on the other...We don't get to the joy of Christmas by detouring around fear/ignoring the fears. We get there, as Phillips Brooks knew, only by allowing the hopes and fears of all the years to meet one another in that little town of Bethlehem.

Prior to that moment in the little town Bethlehem, we have another moment where the meeting of hope and fear resulted in deep and everlasting joy. Mary has been 'favored,' chosen by God...But it may not have felt like it. The sheer excitement of the angel's message most likely rested alongside the sheer anxiety, the shock, the trepidation of her predicament. A teenager, who is having a child out of wedlock and barely betrothed to a carpenter - who, in turn, is thinking about a divorce to avoid a scandal for both of them... Mary, God's favored one, will bear a child - who will later be executed as a criminal. Not exactly a Hallmark movie. Not exactly the contents we'd include in a Christmas letter. The story is so familiar to us that we let its familiarity hide its scandal.

Of course, the ultimate scandal is that God would enter human life with all its struggles, depravity, violence, and corruption...God had appointed prophets, kings, and favored ones before, but never had God entered the human fray so directly, intimately, and vulnerably. If we were to envision the nature of God's feelings in this moment, perhaps there would also be a combination of hope and fear. Hope for what the entry of Jesus would hold. Fear for how God's Son might be received.

And so it is equally remarkable that both Mary, and God presumably, meet this moment of equal parts of hope and fear...with joy...Joy is a recurring theme throughout Luke's gospel. The joy of annunciations and the births of John and Jesus is repeated throughout the ministry of Jesus in the joy of forgiveness, the joy of healings, the joy of raising the dead, and the joy of receiving the marginalized and the forgotten. Appropriately, at the end of the Gospel of Luke, following Jesus' life, at a time when fear must have threatened to overwhelm hope, the disciples return to Jerusalem with joy and are in the Temple praising God. The gospels describe a God, manifested in Jesus, who brings joy to the human experience, and that joy is unmistakable, remarkable, inspirational, and never ceasing...When Jesus came, or even was foretold to be coming...Mary changed.

Watching the cartoon, *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, is a holiday tradition for many people. A favorite scene is when Linus, standing on a bare stage, recites the story of the birth of Jesus from the gospel of Luke. Now, that scene nearly didn't make it into the show. TV network executives thought it too religious, and the reading from Luke simply too lengthy. However, the scene stayed and it became a cherished moment.

There's one feature of that scene that not many people notice (I'm one of them – I learned of this only in preparation for this message). During Linus's narration, at the very moment when he quotes the angel saying, 'Fear not,' Linus does something totally unexpected...He drops his security blanket! Anyone who's familiar with Linus knows he

carries his blanket everywhere - except for the few times when Snoopy would briefly steal it. Every time that happened, the otherwise cool, calm Linus melts into frantic angst. Linus simply cannot be without his blanket...Except in this moment when he's standing on stage reciting the Christmas story. With the Christ child on his mind and the angel's call "fear not", to release the fear in his heart, he doesn't need that special blanket – no frantic angst! His body changes, his mind is engaged, and his heart fills with joy as he shares this centuries old story with his peers – some who may be hearing it for the first time. It's subtle, but clear - when the story of Jesus came, the character of Linus changed.

Henri Nouwen writes this about Advent: "Advent does not lead to nervous tension stemming from expectation of something spectacular about to happen. On the contrary, Advent leads to a growing inner stillness and joy allowing me to realize that he for whom I am waiting has already arrived and speaks to me in the silence of my heart."

In an article by Judy Holmes-Jensen, she wrote, "I am a chaplain in a hospital where I serve folks in a unique cultural mix of urban and rural poor outside of a large metropolitan area. I am present for heartache, bad news, and end of life choices daily. As I have thought about the intersection of these things I find myself reflecting on how joy does not necessarily mean happy applause. Joy is a spiritual fruit, cultivated in hard soil, watered by hope, and survives when the sun has somehow scorched your heart. It takes root in faithfulness and community despite the environment; and the praise, the joy comes when - unseen by those too far removed - compassion, love, kindness, and tenderness sing forth." ...

Compassion, love, kindness, and tenderness – all embodiments of joy - sing forth. Much like Mary, the mother of Jesus, in her encounter with Elizabeth, with the song that bursts forth from her. Much like Linus, with the joyful news of Christ's birth story tumbling out of his mouth to soothe the wailing hopelessness of Charlie Brown. Much like the church,

in every age, as we are changed by the power of this season, and are invited to model embodiments of joy in a world where the 'hopes and fears of all the years are met' in the person of Jesus.

May we sing joyfully letting our lives sing forth with compassion, love, kindness, and tenderness, not just in this Advent and Christmas seasons, but in our whole lives. Amen.

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