



The Hopes and Fears of All the Years

One of my favorite songs to sing during Advent is “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” One of the verses goes like this:

“O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie,
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep, the silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth, the everlasting light,
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”

The imagery that the writer uses here is that the streets of our world are dark. We live on the roads of fear, anxiety, and uncertainty. We walk on the avenues of evil, oppression, and discouragement. We travel through the boulevards of hopelessness, doubt, and grief. The good news of Advent is that God didn't abandon our world and walk away from it. In thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light. The sending God Whom we serve sent His one and only son, Jesus Christ, to shine the light of hope into our dark world. If ever there was a Christmas season where we needed hope, it is this one.

Every day, as I read what is going on in our country and our world online, on TV, and in the newspaper, I see a lot of fear and anxiety that is front and center in our lives. We are living in the worst economic conditions since the Great Depression. Banks are collapsing. Stores are going out of business. The Big Three American automakers may not survive. Retail stores that normally do 20-40% of their annual business between Thanksgiving and Christmas are wondering how much they will make this year. People are being laid off their jobs. People can't make their mortgage payments and are losing their homes. Our military and their families are stretched to their limits as they continue to serve overseas for longer and longer assignments. We wonder if our state and national governments will be able to lead us out of this mess. And now there is new violence in Mumbai, India. We wonder what this will mean for our own lives, our families, our loved ones, our congregations, and our presbytery.

The hymn tells us that the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight. The fears of just this one year are enough for me. I can't imagine the fears of ALL the years. That would really be overwhelming!

And yet, we are reminded that the very first Christmas happened in a mood of fear, as well. In Luke 2:28-30 and 37, we read, “And he (the angel Gabriel) came to her (Mary) and said, ‘Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!’ But she was greatly troubled at the saying and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to

her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God...' For nothing will be impossible with God."

We also learn that Joseph was afraid. In Matthew 1:20-21, we read that "an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, 'Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.'"

So, the fears of our lives help us relate a little bit to what Mary and Joseph might have experienced. Fear has always been a part of Christmas. And Jesus Christ is the One Who overcomes our fears and gives us the strength to move forward in spite of them. It is no accident that the commandment mentioned most often in the Bible is "Do not fear." Fear has a way of paralyzing us. We hold back from doing certain things. We hold on to what we have. We hide in our cocoons.

Fear can be very destructive. It can cause us to give up on trying to be missional, and learning how to let God send us into our world. It can cause us to hold on to our resources of time, talents, and money, instead of learning to be good stewards when there are so many in need. It can cause us to focus all of our energy on ourselves, instead of giving ourselves away for the cause of Christ.

This is a difficult and challenging year for many of us. But, Christmas is not just about the fears of all the years. It's about the hopes and fears of all the years. The gospel of Jesus Christ is a gospel of hope. It is not just good news for Christians, but good news for all people. God has a place for every one of us to participate in His mission in our communities. And regardless of what talents and abilities we may or may not have, we can all offer hope to people around us. Many people right now are in great need of this. What can you do? Who is God calling you to share hope with?

Advent and Christmas meet at the intersection of hopes and fears. This year, I pray that you will be filled with the hope of Christ, that it will overcome the fears that we feel, and that you will share this hope with others around you. God bless you!



Respond to: ClarkCowden@PresbyterySD.org