

THE COMING OF JOY

by Ray C. Stedman

I would like for you to meditate with me on the announcement of the angel to the shepherds in Bethlehem.

If you have not already seen the fine musical production *His Love Reaching*, I hope you will see the last performance of it here tonight. Those of us who have seen it were blessed by it. I especially appreciated the attempt it made to take us back in imagination to that scene in the fields of Bethlehem, in the darkness of night, where the angel of the Lord suddenly appeared to some unexpecting shepherds. He scared the living daylight out of them. That is what it says -- in a rather loose translation. They were terrified, and rightly so, for this was a sudden appearance of a supernatural figure.

I don't know what the angels look like. Scripture does not describe them very carefully. The best description we have of the appearance of angels says that they are like young men dressed in white garments. Those were the angels that appeared at the resurrection. Never once are they referred to as having wings. I don't know where that idea came from, unless it came from the concept that angels are free to move about rapidly, and to us that suggests flying.

But the angel suddenly appeared out of the darkness of the night. Around him shone the radiance of glory -- a nimbus -- as the glory of the Lord shone round about the shepherds. And as the Authorized Version puts it, "they were sore afraid." Luke 2:10:

But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord." {Luke 2:10-11 NIV}

Thus the birth of God's long-awaited redeemer was introduced to a darkened, weary, and exhausted world. History tells us that the time of our Lord's birth was indeed a time of weariness and widespread despair among men and among the nations of the earth. The civilizations of that day had all played themselves out. This is how Matthew Arnold describes the world into which the Lord came:

On that hard, pagan world, disgust and secret loathing fell.
Deep weariness and sated lust made human life a hell.

It is striking that the human emotion that was first encountered by the angelic messenger was that of fear. Men were afraid in that day. They were afraid of many things, as they are today. There was Herod the Great on the throne. Herod was cruel, and was able to accomplish his wrath upon whoever was the object of his disfavor. He had personally put to death many, even in his own family, because of their antagonism to his plans. Also there were the Romans, too, with their proud legions, marching up and down across the face of the earth, holding everything in a severe and iron bondage. Many wars broke out and the economy was uncertain. The people were afraid.

Perhaps the most striking thing to us about this story is that we can so easily put ourselves back into that situation of fear, for by far the dominant mood of the hour today is that of fear.

The other day I was watching a television news story on how senior citizens today are afraid to go out of their homes, and must lock themselves into their apartments for months on end because of their fear of being assaulted, mugged, injured, or killed if they step outside their door. As you know, things have come to such a pass that policemen must ride our city buses and trains in order to protect people from danger. Crime has mounted to such a degree that people are afraid to walk the streets.

It always amazes me that anyone should really think that we have made any progress in solving the basic

problems of humanity in all these 2,000 years. I am almost tempted to laugh out loud when someone talks to me of the great progress we, as human beings, have made when we are still working on the same problems they worked with 2,000 years ago. The movies of our day are reflecting the uneasiness that is in people's hearts -- movies such as *The Omen*, *Jaws*, *King Kong*. Such disaster movies all reflect the sense of impending doom that is so deep in the hearts of people today. All the mini-wars that break out, like the one in Lebanon today, betray the increasing tension among the great powers of the earth as they move toward a certain conflict that everyone knows is yet to come.

As we watch Jimmy Carter putting together his Cabinet, we do so with mingled apprehension and hope, not sure what will happen. We are told by the economists of our day that all we can look forward to is more inflation, higher taxes, high unemployment, and an ultimate, certain collapse.

Then, to top it all, we in this beautiful Bay Area are waiting for the great earthquake!

Yet the first word of the angel to those shepherds in the field was "Fear not. Be not afraid." I do not think any greater news can come to us than that announcement. It came to them, as the angel went on to say, because a Savior was born in Bethlehem -- a Deliverer. Because of the presence of a Deliverer, they need not be afraid of anything.

You and I know how frequently we draw the parallel between the coming of Jesus as a babe in Bethlehem and the coming of Jesus into the human heart. Even our carols do this. The third verse of "O Little Town of Bethlehem" says,

How silently, how silently,
The wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of His heaven.
No ear may hear His coming,
But in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive Him still,
The dear Christ enters in.

Every Christmas season we remind each other that it is not enough for Christ to have been born in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago. What really counts is Christ being born in the human heart. Your Bethlehem is when Christ came to you and was born in your heart. It is that remarkable parallel that constitutes the good news of Christianity today -- that Jesus can be born in us as certainly as he was born in Bethlehem. Therefore, to us, the angel stands to make his welcome announcement: "Fear not. Fear not, for unto you is born this day a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

Last summer I learned that the words "Fear not" appear in the Bible exactly 365 times. Did you ever wonder why? Did you ever wonder why we are not to fear? The reason, of course, is that a Savior has been presented -- a Deliverer, a rescuer, one who is adequate to free us from any threat and danger in any situation. That is why the shepherds were told not to be afraid. It did not make any difference what Herod or the Romans would do, or what the clever, manipulative minds of men would try to set in motion; there was a Deliverer, a Savior among them. A Redeemer had come who would change the situation and use it for his own glory and bring them through. Therefore the announcement of the angel was "Be not afraid."

Some of you saw a rather dramatic illustration of this last week on television if you watched the three-hour dramatization of *Victory at Antebbe*. We saw again the story of that remarkable episode of last July when the hostages who were captured by revolutionaries and held at the Ugandan airport were rescued by a daring Israeli raid. You who saw that show recall how much fear there was in the hearts of the hostages as they waited for almost certain death, knowing that a great game of gambling was being played on an international level with their lives at stake. As the deadline neared, it seemed almost certain that they would be ruthlessly sacrificed. How they feared -- and they showed it in various ways. Some, unable to contain themselves, went into hysterics. Others were quietly sobbing away in corners, gripped with fear. Then came the moment of victory, when, without their expecting it, without any realization that it was about to happen, their rescuers

were there and their cruel conquerors were wiped out. In the plane as they were returning to Israel there was nothing but joy -- wild, abandoned joy -- because that is what the heart always feels when it is set free from a threatened danger. Joy is the result.

I think this suggests to us that what the presence of Jesus in our lives ought to bring us, as Christians, is the absence of fear and the presence of joy. That is what it is all about. And it is not intended to be a once-for-all experience. I know that many of us look back to the moment of our conversion as a great moment of joy. We had a sense of deliverance, a sense of freedom, a sense of release. But this is intended to be an ongoing process. We don't face dangerous and frightening situations just once or twice in a lifetime; we face them every day. Anytime something strikes terror in the heart or grips us with the cold hand of fear, anytime we are anxious and troubled and weary, anytime something seems to threaten us or our loved ones is a moment of danger. And for that moment -- for that moment -- we have a Savior, a Deliverer. Therefore the continuing word of God to us who have such a Deliverer is "Be not afraid."

That is why the chief mark of the Christian ought to be the absence of fear and the presence of joy. We have often quoted the description of a Christian as one who is:

- Completely fearless,
- Continually cheerful, and
- Constantly in trouble.

And how that fits! This is not to be a once-for-all experience, but one that is continuous, day-by-day. It is that presence of joy and absence of fear that marks our genuine Christianity and proves that we really are what we claim to be.

I think this is what is missing oftentimes in our evangelistic endeavors today. I am not against many of the movements that try to tell the great story of Christianity by various ways and means. But I tell you this: None of these movements or methods will ever mean a thing unless they are backed by a life that has this mark of genuine Christianity -- the presence of joy and the absence of fear. Paul said in Romans 14:17:

The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, {Rom 14:17 NIV}

Therefore that ought to be the mark of every Christian, that same sense of being free, of being delivered because the Deliverer is present. And as we look at him -- not as we seek for the feeling or look for the joy, but as we concentrate on the Savior, as we remind ourselves of who he is and what he came to do and what he can do -- then we will discover again that same wonderful fulfillment of the angel's announcement. We need not be afraid. And there will break upon our hearts and faces a sense of continuing joy. Friedrich Nietzsche, the atheistic German philosopher, made this surly remark to some Christians one day; "If you want me to believe in your Redeemer, then you've got to look a lot more redeemed." That is true, isn't it?

Just last week we went through another death of one close to us. For the last three or four Sundays we have had to announce a death that touches us deeply. This was a very dear and beloved friend, one who many of us will remember with love for many years -- Ed Stirm, one of the original founders and elders of PBC. Ed had a stroke this past week and, without pain or struggle, was taken into the presence of the Lord. We had a memorial service for him Friday morning, when those of us who knew him well gathered together. At the close of it, Bill Gwinn, Ed's son-in-law, representing the family, stood up to share a few thoughts. It was a triumphant occasion, not a time of sadness. It was a time of fond remembrance and rejoicing, and of sorrow, only in the sense of facing the years without Ed around and missing him.

When Bill stood up he told us something that the pastor at his church in Santa Cruz said last Sunday. Not knowing that anything like this was to happen, the pastor had talked about the basis of the Christian's happiness. He said that Christmas was a time of happiness, but that Christmas is not what makes us happy. And if your family is all gathered around you at Christmastime, he said, the presence of all your loved ones gives you joy in your heart. But if that is the sole basis of your joy, what happens if one of those loved ones is taken away? Will your happiness remain?

Bill said he didn't think much about it at the time, although the thought stayed in his mind. When his father-in-law, who was as beloved to him as his own father, was suddenly taken that week, Bill said, "Well, the loved one was taken away, but the happiness still remains." Our joy does not come through circumstances. We welcome happy circumstances, and we thank God for them. But if we could see what our lives would be like without Jesus Christ for even one moment, we would never cease to praise God for every single blessing that comes into our lives. It all comes from his loving, gracious hands. But what if the loved ones were gone? Would the happiness remain?

No matter what the trial may be, the promise of this verse is that we have a Savior, a Deliverer, especially designed to handle that problem, a Savior who is with us always. If we remember that, and look to him, he will take us through it. He does not promise to take the problem away, but he says he will take us through it. He will strengthen us to face it and will give us courage and peace and joy in the midst of it. Therefore the promise of the angel was "Do not be afraid, for I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people [not to everyone, automatically handed out, but to anyone]. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord."

This is what Christmas must mean to us. And all the days of the year that lie ahead are to be met by the fact that we have in our midst and in our hearts, if we have come to know him, a Savior, a Deliverer, a Rescuer, Christ the Lord. All authority has been given unto him, in heaven and on earth. No event and no circumstance can come into our lives that will be more than he can handle, more than he can take us through. It is that knowledge that gives the heart peace and puts joy upon the countenance.

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