

Christmas-Luke 2:8-20 - Emotions of Christmas: Fear & Joy

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

I'm going to finish reading the Christmas story from the Gospel of Luke that we started at the beginning of the service this morning. I am aware that we had a sermon on this passage just a couple of months ago when we celebrated Christmas in September, but I've just loved more and more as I've studied this, what God is doing, particularly with the shepherds in this story. Our text for this morning is verses 8 through 20 of Luke 2. It's really their story, how Christmas and how God brings a Savior to them and it impacts their hearts and their lives. It's a great window into what Christmas means for people like us. So notice the shepherds particularly as I read and notice how in this one day they move from fear to joy. Quickly, but very clearly from fear to joy. Luke 2 at verse 8. And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.

[1 : 17] An angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were terrified. 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. This will be a sign to you. You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel praising God and saying, glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests. When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has told us about.

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph and the baby who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child. And all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

[2 : 30] Let's pray together. Father, we thank you again for this familiar story. We've heard it now many times probably just this Christmas season.

Would you write its truth on our hearts? Would we know not merely that it really happened, although that's a great, great joy.

But would we know what that means for us and for our lives. Father, speak to us this morning, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. We've been talking through the Christmas season about the impact of Christmas on our hearts.

How the incarnation of the Son of God Himself impacts our longing and hope. Our grief and comfort.

Our apathy and awe. Last night we talked about turmoil and peace in our hearts. This morning I want to see briefly, almost as briefly as last night, kids.

[3 : 38] Close to a homily. I want us to see how it transforms our fear. Now, fear is a pretty broad term, right? There are lots of things that you can be afraid of.

See if you can think of something that you're afraid of. When I was growing up, and yeah, still today it's snakes. I'm so scared of snakes. Anybody else afraid of snakes?

Tell me I'm not the only person. Okay, good. But that's not the kind of fear that I'm talking about this morning. There are a lot of phobias out there.

A lot of people had a frightful night last night because they struggle with claustrophobia and heard that he was coming. All right.

All right. Yeah, wow is right. It fit into the fear sermon, you know? My family is leaving right now.

[4 : 38] Terrible. I am definitely not talking about that kind of fear this morning. The kind of fear I want us to see Christmas address in our hearts is this persistent underlying fear, this feeling that we have of discomfort in relating to God, and having a close relationship with Him.

I'll say it this way for our purposes this morning, that the fear I'm talking about is living with a deep sense that God is distant, dangerous, or dissatisfied.

Remember, I'm talking about a feeling that you have, not necessarily something you believe intellectually. You may not believe any of those things about God, but this is how we relate to Him. What are the things in our hearts that drive us to relate to God in these ways? A lot of fear. Fear is where we find the shepherds in this Christmas story, right?

The angel appears to them, verse 9, and they are terrified. Some versions say filled with great fear. Or my favorite one, they were sore afraid, right?

[5 : 57] They encounter this heavenly messenger, this representative of God, and fear is their immediate reaction. Now, of course, there are very good reasons for that.

I mean, put yourself in their shoes, right? Here they are, not expecting anything, and all of a sudden, someone shows up like nothing they have ever seen before. They didn't know what to expect from or how to relate to an angel.

But I think there's another reason behind their fear, that shepherds also knew well to be afraid of a divine representative because shepherds well understood in their culture they were religious outsiders.

They were unclean, unreliable, unavailable for religious matters. Because of their crazy work schedules and the fact that they were often ceremonially unclean from touching dead things or from the animals they were around, they were usually absent from all things churchy, from religious stuff. They were despised in the community, thought of as thieves and so mistrusted by others they didn't even qualify as legal witnesses. Of course they were afraid about what God thought about them, right?

[7 : 15] What He might do to them when they encounter Him. How do you relate to God? Let's be clear as we start to talk about fear.

There's an appropriate fear of God, isn't there? The Bible talks about living with the fear of God, having a reverence and an awe before Him, before His holiness and His glory bowing before Him and living that way.

It's like Isaiah, when we get a glimpse of God, we should be reminded of our unworthiness and that His purity should rightly make us just disintegrate into ashes before Him.

He's that holy and we're that unworthy. But we also have an inappropriate fear of God in our hearts that causes us to have unhealthy ways of relating to God.

For some of us, we have like the shepherds, what I'll call the fear of the unknown. We keep our distance from God as though He's some distant relative that we never know what to expect from and we don't really trust.

[8 : 24] Having a relationship with God is, we don't even know what that would be like or feel like. We've heard some things about Him, but we don't really know Him.

It's why we keep our distance from reading the Bible or praying much. It seems too close to God. Exposing my heart to Him just doesn't feel normal or right.

Maybe you can relate to that in your relationship with God. For others of us, we live with this underlying feeling that God is a cosmic hall monitor.

That He's always on the lookout for us to slip up. To fail Him in some small way that He can get us back for and balance the scales all the time because that's what He's always doing.

I was volunteering in my daughter's first grade class a few weeks ago and the teacher left the room for a few minutes and she left one student in charge of the classroom.

[9 : 28] He was in charge of watching all the other students to make sure no one talked or got out of line and he stood at the front with a dry erase marker to write the name of any kid who spoke on the board.

I gotta tell you, I hadn't had that feeling since I was in school. I was genuinely afraid He was gonna write my name on the board and she was gonna come back in and think, well, what did Mr. Spink

do while I was gone?

That fear that there's someone watching, that God sees everything and He's gonna catch you when you mess up. That He's gonna get you back. Sometimes we live as though God is dangerous. That He's out to get us. He's really gonna make us feel it if we mess up. And so we're just tightly wound all the time. We're playing it safe. In sports terms, you would call it playing not to lose. I mean, you've got the lead, right? You're supposed to be going to heaven. Just play it safe and don't blow it. As long as you don't mess it up enough, you'll make it through and you'll get into heaven in the end.

[10 : 31] Play it safe or else. The final way this shows up in my life is when serving God begins to feel like a drag.

One more sermon to write this week. Another conference to attend, really? Saturday? I bet they're gonna want me to come back for church on Christmas Day.

Golly. Small group? I did that years ago. Jobs for life? Nice idea, but who really has time for that kind of stuff?

I'm exhausted. I'm worn out. This unhealthy way of relating to God is very prevalent among the most committed church members.

And it's hard to see in our lives because we're doing so many godly things that it seems like we've got a wonderful relationship with God, but inside is this gnawing fear that perhaps we're not doing quite enough.

[11 : 35] We haven't done enough to wow God, to impress Him. It's like He's an Olympic judge and He hasn't seen quite enough fantastic stuff to give us that ten we want.

I mean, we're pretty good, but we haven't impressed Him yet. And the result of that is that serving God becomes drudgery and leads to exhaustion.

I've always got to do more. Could you see the shepherds feeling some of that kind of fear? Based on their likely lack of religious awards and recognition they had received?

An unhealthy fear of God that leaves me cold and distant from Him. Often tired. Rarely joyful.

Does that describe you sometimes? We all can slip into those feelings. Even if it's not what we say we believe about God, that He's distant or dangerous or dissatisfied.

[12 : 38] We felt the drudgery, the lack of joy, the distance from God lately. Often that comes from fear.

An aspect of fear in our hearts. Well, the angel speaks into that terrified bunch of shepherds the first Christmas and he says to these very fearful shepherds, fear not.

Verse 10, right? 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. Fearful people, fear not. Something is happening that must transform your fear.

That makes something different. Jesus comes to change the way we relate to God. That these unhealthy, fear-driven approaches would be replaced with joyful relationship.

[13 : 40] Good news of great joy. See, joy is, as we said with the kids, not something you can open in a present, right?

Even an empty one, apparently. It's not happiness. It's not merely warm feelings and positive vibes from life's circumstances.

No, joy, biblically, is a deep sense that God is near, safe, and satisfied. See, joy is relational.

Just like fear. Having a deep sense of joy comes from relating differently to your Creator. It's a relationship thing.

The message of Christmas, the announcement of the angels to the shepherds, is that there's a change in their relationship with God. The angel says it this way.

[14 : 39] Look at verse 11 again. Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you. Christ the Lord. God has come to be born to be your Savior.

Notice what that means for our relationship with God. What God has done to change our relationship with Him. He's not distant. He has come near.

This is Emmanuel, God with us, who insists on nothing keeping Him from us. He wants you to know Him, to draw close to Him, to share your heart with Him.

A Savior has been born to you. God has become man. He's come near. Secondly, He's not dangerous, out to harm you.

He's safe. He comes to rescue you and do you good. I know some of my fellow C.S. Lewis fans will be bothered by God being called safe.

[15:44] He's not safe. He's good. He's not a tame lion. Listen, what I mean by safe is that He's safe to trust.

That He loves you and has your best interest at heart. John writes in John 3, 17 that God sent His only begotten Son into the world not to condemn the world, not to catch you doing something wrong so He can get you, so that He can get back at you and even things out.

But why? He sent His Son in the world to save the world, to rescue you in your mess. He wasn't trying to catch you making it.

He wanted to rescue you in the midst of it. That's grace. That's God's heart toward you. Finally, in Jesus, God is satisfied.

The need to perform your way into His good graces is over. Jesus has done it and He now dignifies you with the abundant life full and free, finally living the way God designed you to live in the first place without the fear of His disappointment.

[17:03] free, full of joy knowing your Father is smiling on you regardless of your performance because of Jesus. Do you hear why the writers of Scripture say our salvation produces an inexpressible and glorious joy?

That's the result of what God does in fixing our relationship with Him. He gives us an entirely new relationship from the one we naturally have. free and full relationship with God of new approach to all of life.

There's no more distant relative. No more cosmic hall monitor. No more frowning Olympic judge. We have a loving heavenly Father.

This is why grace produces joyful obedience rather than drudgery in relationship with God. No more fear of God's critical eye having to be appeased by a perfect performance.

Instead, delighting in the light burden that is ours. Following a Savior who has come and performed perfectly in our place brought us into an entirely new relationship with God.

[18:20] That's what a Savior means. What it would have meant to the shepherds. Look at the change they experience when they see the Savior. Verse 17. When they'd seen Him they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

Verse 20. The shepherds returned glorifying and praising God for all the things they'd heard and seen which were just as they had been told. How did they go from fearful outcasts to those who are praising and rejoicing in God and telling everybody about Him and talking with people about this God.

What changed the shepherds? It was that they heard and saw a Savior. It's that simple. That's all that happens in between.

They hear there's a Savior they go see the Savior and they're changed. They let go of their fear. They don't cower before God anymore. Now they praise Him and rejoice in Him.

This change is portrayed subtly but beautifully in a TV special you may have seen recently called Charlie Brown's Christmas.

[19:37] If you're not a Peanuts aficionado Linus is a character. Linus is known for always having his blanket with him. He's somewhat of a fearful character in the comic.

he's not able to go anywhere without that security blanket. Recently social media has noticed something about Linus and his blanket on this special.

I want to show you a short clip. Watch the blue blanket carefully. Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?

Sure Charlie Brown I can tell you what Christmas is all about. Lights please.

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field keeping watch over their flock by night and lo the angel of the Lord came upon them and the glory of the Lord shone round about them and they were sore afraid and the angel said unto them fear not for behold I bring you tidings of great joy which shall be to all people for unto you is born this day in the city of David a savior which is Christ the Lord and this shall be a sign unto you you shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger and suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying glory to God in the highest and on earth peace good will toward men that's what Christmas is all about Charlie Brown that's what Christmas is all about

[21 : 32] I know you know what Christmas is all about did you notice the blanket did you notice when he says do not fear what he's able to let go of what the angels have announced what the shepherds witnessed is something that allows us to let go of our fears you may know that but have you actually dropped your blanket have you let go of other things that you'd find security in in order to cling to Jesus has the truth the angels announced enabled you to let go of fearful ways of relating to God and experience the deep joy of being his beloved child what does it mean to you to have a savior that's the question I want you to consider as we close this morning what does a savior change in your heart and life we're celebrating him today right what difference does it make for you I really want you to write something or something's down on your bulletin what does a savior mean to you what's the difference in your life I'll prime the pump for you while you're thinking it's good news of great joy for all people so that includes you and me right changes something for us so the fact that you have a savior means all these things it means you will never be completely alone because God is with us you will never face the fires of hell for your sin never it means no failure in your life will cost you God's smile no sin you commit can make God stop loving you it means there's nothing you lack for being welcomed into God's family it means you're assured of life full and free the way God created and designed you to live can you believe that all of those things and many many more are true all of that because of Christmas because a savior has been born born to you write something in your own words what difference does it make in your life that you have a savior I don't know how you feel this morning but I can assure you you're not worse off or more fearful than those shepherds on the hillside that night who started fearful and ended joyful all because of seeing Jesus Jesus can do that for you too and you can know the joy of life lived with nothing to lose nothing to protect nothing to hide nothing to fear because you're a beloved child of the king of the universe dancing and preaching and playing and sacrificing and serving all freely and knowing that he's smiling having the comfort of your father's smile and his perfect care for you if that were really true what might you do if you could really live like that what might you try if you had that kind of comfort and joy there's Christmas dinner conversation for you kids let me say it this way to you you can write what having a savior means to you in your own words doesn't have to be long Christmas Jesus your savior being born for you means God loves you even when you have a bad day even when you're bad having a savior means you never ever have to be scared of God he loves you you can trust him kids having a savior means that that no matter how great a day it is and this might be a great day for many of you that your best day is always ahead of you there's always a best day coming in the future when when God makes everything right the way it should be that's something to be excited about no matter what gifts you get or don't get today you have an incredible gift a savior who's been born to you a wonderful wonderful savior amen let's pray father thank you for that gift thank you for our savior may our hearts rejoice that we have a father that we live in his presence and under his smile and that that will never change we know that's only possible not because of who we are but because of who Jesus is and how much he loves us give us great joy in that today and always we ask in his name amen for more information visit us online at southwood.org what year use virginia alwaysções they're of