

Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light; the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.” This line, of course, is from a beloved Christmas carol I’m sure we all know fairly well, “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” and it will most likely be sung tomorrow night as we sing songs by the fire. After all, what Christian doesn’t cherish the image of eternal light beaming from a ramshackle stable where the Christ child dozes in the arms of his mother? Who could argue with the fact, that it is hard not to find a least a smidgeon of joy, as we celebrate the hope his birth brings to a world where hope so often seems in short supply? But fears? What has fear got to do with Christmas?

The history of the carol can provide us with a possible hint. “O Little Town of Bethlehem” was written in 1868 by the famed preacher Phillips Brooks. The Civil War had ended only three years earlier. Yes, Lee and Grant had signed their peace accord and had shaken hands on the deal. Yes, battle-weary veterans from both sides had laid down their arms and trudged home. But half the nation still lay in ruins, and on the home front (north and south) families had been decimated by the carnage of the most brutal war America had ever known.

Wives and mothers counted themselves lucky if their husbands and boys had come home lacking an arm, or a leg, or an eye, or shivering with PTSD. They knew their loved ones could easily have not come home at all. In 1868, it gave Americans some comfort to picture the humble Bethlehem stable as the place where hope and fear meet each other — and where hope emerges the ultimate victor. You might even say that long after Brooks put pen to paper to describe those silent stars floating over Bethlehem’s deep and dreamless sleep, we still yearn for an abiding peace that is a freedom from fear.

Perhaps we can find the peace we are yearning for this morning, as we look beyond John the Baptist and the alarmist tone he sets in our gospel lesson when he declares: “Even now the ax is lying at the root of the tree; every tree therefore that

does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” These are fairly cringe worthy words, and they fall short of delivering any type of comfort and/or relief for us. After all, John’s prophecy is fairly calculated and rather disturbing. And yet, it is as much a part of the church’s Advent proclamation as the message of comfort and peace that we receive as we rejoice in the concept of Immanuel “God with us.”

I sometimes wonder if we Christians are used to finding prophetic condemnation in the Old Testament, and comfort and consolation in the New Testament, but this week the order is reversed. The words we find in Luke appear to be trafficking in fear, while our passage from Zephaniah sounds off a note of triumphant hope: “The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more.”

Not that Zephaniah’s larger prophecy is all sweetness and light. Like his contemporary Jeremiah, Zephaniah in the early chapters of his book voices the message of an angry and resentful God, “I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth, says the Lord. I will sweep away humans and animals; I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea.” He continues: “On that day, says the Lord, a cry will be heard from the Fish Gate, a wail from the Second Quarter, a loud crash from the hills. ... I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the people who rest complacently on their dregs....”

The prophet’s words are practically an accusation, or charge, against our own culture. Yet, we do not vanquish fear by denying or avoiding it. We need to admit that fear is as much a part of the Christmas story as peace and joy. It actually helps us during our Advent journey to acknowledge our fears, our worries, and our concerns. For it is only by moving through our fears, to the joy that awaits us on the other side, that we truly grasp the triumphant good news of the Christ child coming into the world.

In fact, there's more fear in the Christmas story than most of us care to be reminded of. It's unmistakably present in John's fiery preaching, of course, but we glimpse it also in the angel's repeated greeting: "Do not be afraid." Yes, the angel says not to be afraid, to Mary, to Joseph, and to the Shepherds, but the fact that such an exhortation needs to be voiced at all, is an admission that fear is an ever-present reality — then and now!

You just don't get that, in the secular version of the holiday that many of our neighbors enjoy. It's all light and no shadow, all merriment, and no malice. As for those who turn for a moment from the relentless yuletide cheer- to acknowledge some all-too-human problem or difficulty –they might be accused of lacking sufficient "Christmas spirit." They might even be called a Grinch or an Ebenezer Scrooge!

A religious author named Walter Wangerin captures the shallowness of the secular Christmas merriment that is celebrated by countless people these days with these words: "Mindlessly do the bells of secular celebrations jingle for Christmas. Meaninglessly do carols repeat their tinny joys in all the malls in America. No richer than soda pop is every sentimentalized Christmas special on TV. Fearless is the world at play with godly things, because Godless is its heart. If God is a laughing Santa, why should we be afraid?"

But God, is no "laughing Santa!" Our secular culture may be quick to domesticate God into a benevolent philanthropist, a kindly figure very much like Old Saint Nick, but that image lacks biblical witness or scriptural proof. God is to be loved, yes; but we also tend to forget that God is also to be feared. Which begs the question, do we really want to discard the biblical understanding of our God as a righteous judge? Do we really want to live in a world where there is no final judgment, no ultimate accounting for deeds of good or deeds of evil?

Clearly, John the Baptist wants no part of such a world — nor do the gospel-writers, as they bookend the Christmas story with angels who preface good news with “Fear not,” on one side, and with the soldiers of a jealous king who run babies through with their swords, on the other. In other words, **to get to joy, we have to pass through fear.** We generally don’t receive Christmas joy by detouring around fear. 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.

In this life there are things to be feared — no doubt about it! If we did not fear the worst outcomes of human life — illness, poverty, pain, suffering, death, and all the rest — we’d be considered foolish. Yet, both Zephaniah and John are telling us good news! They’re telling us that all the fears and anxieties we hold onto are next to nothing when laid up against the great plans God has for this world that we live in.

Pastor and theologian Leonard Sweet tells a story about a certain Native American tribe who had a unique way of training young braves. On the night of a boy’s 13th birthday, he is led out into the wilderness to spend the night alone. Most young braves, at that point in their lives, had never been away from the security of their elders. Yet on that night, young teenagers are blindfolded and taken miles away. When each one takes off their blindfold, they find themselves in the middle of the woods alone and dependent on nothing but the good will of the Great Spirit, and their own survival training.

It isn’t too hard for us to imagine how terrifying this must be for the young boys who go through this rite of passage, as their imaginations most likely magnify every woodland sound, until it seems like a fearsome monster. But then, finally, each young brave manages to get to sleep. When dawn breaks, he rubs the sleep from his eyes and looks around. What he sees is an amazing and inspiring sight — a tall man, standing just a few feet away, armed with a bow and arrow. It is his

father. He had been there all night long, weapons at the ready: watching over his son, as he slept.

Into each human life, some fears must intrude. There are indeed times when thick darkness surrounds us, and we may justifiably wonder if we'll ever see daylight again. Yet even in times of loneliness and despair — especially in times of loneliness and despair — we are not alone. There is one who waits beside us, to watch over us and protect us. This is the prime message of the glorious season for which we are now preparing to celebrate ourselves.

At the heart of Christmas is the theological doctrine known as the Incarnation, as the gospel-writer John puts it, “the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son.” Christian writer and poet Kathleen Norris says that “the Incarnation is the place ... where hope contends with fear.” The good news of this bright season is not that we have nothing to fear in this life, but rather that our fearsome and powerful God has the ability to bring us through every lesser fear that may assail us.

O little town of Bethlehem, it’s true that “the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.” In less than two weeks, we will gather to celebrate the good news of the Messiah’s birth. May we discover anew, in these days of expectation, that when hope meets fear in Jesus Christ, the lesser fears of this life are vanquished. The only one we need to fear, then, is God, and the fear of God, as Proverbs says, is “the beginning of wisdom.” Amen!