

12.24.2023 Advent 4 (Christmas Eve)

At our Christmas Eve service tonight, we'll hear the angels tell the shepherds "*Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people*" (Luke 2:10). *Fear not*, they said, and as we make our final preparations for that moment, we would be wise to pause in order to consider those angels, the shepherds, and that fear.

When we consider fear, we understand there is a type of fear that is beneficial. There is such a thing as holy fear, an awe-filled, amazed, wondrous respect for God in all His power and might. This fear, as the Psalms and Proverbs tell us, is "*the beginning of wisdom*" (Proverbs 9:10, Psalm 111:10), because holy fear encourages us to put God first in our lives, to place our Creator above ourselves and all other created things. We even pray for such holy fear during the Sacrament of Confirmation. With the Bishop we pray that the person being confirmed would be filled "with the spirit of thy holy fear, now and forever," for such fear is revealed in Scripture as one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (Isaiah 11:2-3).

Holy fear is a gift from God, and this gift certainly isn't the type of fear the angels spoke of when they said to the shepherds, "*Fear not.*" However, the sort of fear the angels meant is familiar to us all, and easy to find in this world. These days, we need to look no further than the phone in our hand to find that type of fear - the fear of economic collapse, the fear of nuclear or biological weapons in the hands of terrorists, the fear of world war, human suffering, illness, and death.

We live in a world filled with this type of fear, and it's been that way since the time our first parents turned away from a holy fear of God - the awe-filled, amazed, wondrous respect for Him in all His power and might, and turned toward themselves in sinful disobedience. In the Garden of Eden, when our parents fell into sinful separation from God, there's a sense in which fear was separated from God, and the good gift of holy fear, given to us by our Creator, apart from Him, is no longer holy, it's only fear, and without God we should be afraid.

Think of it this way: From a Christian perspective, from the perspective of a

person who lives this earthly life united to God, this world is only a stepping-stone, merely a doorway into life everlasting with Him, and we have no reason to fear leaving it, just like we don't fear leaving the airport when our plane arrives, because we know the time we've spent waiting is finally over, and we're looking forward to reaching our planned destination, but consider that scenario without God. Imagine living this life as if you're waiting at the airport. As you wait, friends, family, and all sorts of people who've been waiting with you board planes and leave this life to travel toward a destination that you have no knowledge of, a place you don't want to go, but as you watch everyone leave, you know the day will come when your plane will arrive, your time of waiting will over, and you'll have to leave this life and journey to what comes next. Apart from God, would you be looking forward to that day, or would you do everything possible to delay your departure?

You see, that's the problem of living this life without God. Apart from Him there is no holy fear, there's only fear. So many people are afraid, because so many people choose to live a life without God, and perhaps the fear that comes from living without Him is a sign meant to point the world toward Him. It would seem that God has made us in such a way that when we're separated from Him, we have this God-given desire that points us toward Him, toward the peace that can only be found in Him.

God has given us such grace in our creation that we have an inherent desire to know Him personally, and such personal knowledge of God is that which the angels will speak of tonight. *"Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people."* Good tidings of great joy found only in the One born in Bethlehem. *Good tidings of great joy* that overcome fear through the presence and power of our Savior Jesus Christ.

His loving presence, that casts out fear (1 John 4:18), is not only the message of the angels, but of the prophets as well. The promise of the Lord's presence and power was made throughout the Old Testament, and in just one example, the prophet Isaiah presented it this way, *"Behold, the Lord GOD will come with a strong hand... He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs with His arm, And carry them in His bosom, And gently lead those who are with young"* (Isaiah 40:10-11).

The *good tidings of great joy*, the presence and power that comes in the Person of Jesus Christ is like a shepherd, both strong and gentle. The Good Shepherd is strong enough to cast out every fear, to conquer every foe, yet gentle enough to gather us up into His arms, the arms of a merciful God.

“Fear not.” That’s the message of the angels. It’s the message of Isaiah. It’s the message of John the Baptist, who came to *“make straight the way of the Lord”* (John 1:23), to tear down every obstacle that separates us from the presence of God.

Tonight, the angels will offer us the same choice they offered the shepherds so long ago. We can choose to have a holy fear of God - the awe-filled, amazed, wondrous respect for Him in all His power and might, the peace that comes from His power and presence, the blessed assurance of His perfect love; or we can choose fear. The fear that fills every moment of a life lived apart from God.

The shepherds chose well. They went to Bethlehem and knelt down before the Savior of the World. By the grace and mercy of Almighty God may we be given the wisdom to choose well, to kneel down before our Savior, to be filled *“with the spirit of thy holy fear, now and forever.”* Amen.

This homily was adapted from a sermon titled *Overcoming Fear*, by L.R. Tarsitano.