The Nativity of the Lord

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Introduction

The Nativity of the Lord is a time of great rejoicing. For the shepherds, it was a time also of fear, of terror even. At times in life, and at times of conflict in particular, our greatest joy may also point to our deepest fear. As you move towards the text for these holy days, consider prayerfully your own sense of awe and how that might reveal fear.

Text

Luke 2:1–14

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and 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 heaven,
    and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'

Comment

Here are some imagined words of Mary in the face of the fear of others:

Birth didn't scare me.
It was the talk of others' fears
that shook me.

I didn't think I was afraid.
Then I heard their stories–
grown men who work dark nights,
comforted by angels: 'do not be afraid'.

I didn't think I was afraid.
Then he shared his dream –
my beloved,
reassured by visions: 'do not be afraid'.

I didn't think I was afraid.
Then they said:
'do not return home'.

And now, I am afraid…

…I fear for this child and our lives,
on the run, uncertain, fleeing,
from the 'fear-power'–driven
recklessness of those
unprepared to trust;
unsure of
their place in the world.

In these uncertain times
I choose to remember
that the fear of those
lost in reckless power
is overturned
by the magnitude of the love
our God has for us.

And so I return to my fearlessness,
and trust in the angels who said:
'do not be afraid'.

There is a song that the Wild Goose Resource Group teaches, based on scripture:

'Don't be afraid, my love is stronger,
my love is stronger than your fear.
Don't be afraid, my love is stronger,
and I have promised, promised to be always near'.

This is what my colleagues in the Wild Goose Resource Group say about this song:

'At a recent Greenbelt Festival, a woman approached one of our group and said, "I
was here last year, when you taught *Don't be afraid*. At that time, I was pregnant.

Soon after I had my baby, I went into a severe postnatal depression and had to go into a psychiatric hospital. All through that time, one of the things that kept me going was singing to myself the words of the song". This is testimony to the effectiveness of this verse as much as a vindication of the value of scriptural words set to music which, far removed from the situation of first singing, can become a resource for personal devotion'.

When we stare fear in the face it can be terrifying and provocative. The birth of a baby can be at once joyful and deeply unsettling.

At times of great change, of transition, there can often be conflict. That conflict may be rooted in fear, or terror of the unknown. The angels – awesome, other–worldly, unsettling –were both the evokers of fear, and the carriers of the message of love and peace.

In times of conflict, it can sometimes be that those very people or experiences that provoke the greatest fear and terror may also hold within them the gift of peace and love that we need to receive.

In situations of conflict there is a tendency to view the 'other' as the enemy. The story of The Nativity offers us the hope that at the heart of unsettling, even fearful experiences, there is love: a love that is stronger than fear.

Response

- Usually our bodies alert us to fear: maybe the hairs on the back of our neck stand up, our hands become clammy, our breathing quickens, we feel a pit in our stomach. These are signs to 'watch out', to 'take care'. What are the signs that your body gives you when alerting you to fear?
- As we prepare for the birth of Jesus, as we wait with Mary and Joseph, with the shepherds and the angels, consider what makes us afraid.
- Consider how we respond to fear and uncertainty, and how these responses might help us now and in the future to face into our fears.

Prayer

Loving God,

May we this day
live with the fearlessness of Mary
and the courage of the shepherds,
who in the face of their fears
nevertheless trusted the angels
and followed
their hearts' yearnings.

As we face our fears today and daily,
may we know the magnitude
of God's love.

May this love
spill out from our hearts
and transform all who

live in fear for their lives
and their loved ones.

This we pray in the name of Jesus,
Amen.

Further Reading

- Prayer and Meditation first appeared in *Pray Now*, a prayer guide produced by the Church of Scotland.
- John L. Bell, 'Don't be Afraid' from *Come all you people: shorter songs for worship* (Wild Goose Publications, 1994).
- Wild Goose Worship Group, 'How far is it?' and 'Registering hope' – symbolic acts for use in public worship on the nature of counting, being counted, and registration, in *Cloth for the Cradle: worship resources and readings for Advent, Christmas and Epiphany*, (Wild Goose Publications, 1997).

Season: Christmas   Themes: Paradox