

## THE FEAR OF CHRISTMAS

Mark 1:1-8

To help create a mood and understanding for this sermon with this strange title I thought we would start with a song. This song is in fact a sermon illustration. I invite you to stand and sing with gusto Santa Claus is Coming to Town.

Part of the reality of the fear of Christmas is embodied in that song. You've seen those videos of the poor kid crying their eyes out when they get up on Santa's knee. You know why they do that. They have been bad—they know that when Santa checks over the list with their name on it, they will fail. Come on now, carry yourselves back to those Santa believing days. Didn't you ever wonder about your own scorecard? Had you been naughty enough to get tossed off the good kids list? I know I worried about this.

For me, I think it was more than just growing up southern Baptist. Like many kids I was fascinated by fire. So I stole, no, no, I borrowed matches from my mother. I went into the garage and lit some newspaper on fire—dropped it in a garbage kind and then the whole thing caught on fire. I put it out—burning my hand in the process. Remember Ben Franklin's adage--`the burnt stove is the best teacher.' For sure, I learned a lesson that day.

The following Christmas I was certain that I would be on Santa's naughty list.

Of course, we don't believe in Santa Claus—but we do believe in the reality of God's judgment. Jesus will come to judge the quick, the living, and the dead. In preparing ourselves to celebrate the reality of the Incarnation we are preparing to greet the One who comes among us full of grace and truth. We know ourselves as not full of grace and truth. If we don't acknowledge our evil, we at least know our emptiness.

But the fear of Christmas has a very practical, real life edge to it. We can see Miracle on 42<sup>nd</sup> St. a hundred times. We can Dream of White Christmases. We can fill ourselves with Norman Rockwell images to overflowing—but yet still, there abides the sadness of Christmas. Family dinners are not always joyous. We miss loved ones who have been taken from us. As a congregation right now we will miss Dagmar and especially we will find this hole in the heart of the congregation when we think of Beth's not being among us in body as well as in spirit. The holidays, for some of us, are not happy. Christmas not only isn't Merry—but the season is merciless. We fear sometimes that we are missing out. There is a great party inside somewhere—but we are on the outside, standing, shivering in the cold looking in.

Another reason to reflect on fear at Christmastime is the Bible. Herod is afraid when he hears the wisemen asking about the new King of the Jews—all Jerusalem is troubled with him. Everybody in the birth narratives is afraid. Zechariah, Mary, Joseph, the wisemen, the shepherds. When the angels show up, when the visions come, when you or I have dreams that send us off in radical new directions, then we should be afraid. IF we are not afraid, sometimes at least, then maybe we don't know what is happening. I guess the sheep weren't afraid.

Finally though here comes John. You brood of vipers—bear fruits that befit repentance. Because God is cutting down the trees and if there is no fruit, into the fire. Are you wheat or are you chaff. Into the fire with the chaff. Repent—repent. I baptize you with water but one is coming who will baptize you with fire. The kingdom of God is coming among you. The old world is coming crashing down. .

Jesus is coming into the world full of grace and truth. But also with profound judgment on the evils of this world and with a powerful call to repentance.

So please understand. We need to have fear at Christmastime.

One of the mystics said—'TO love God is good. To fear God is better'. So we are called to bring to our experience of Christmas fear as well as love. We will sing that the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

Years ago, I was at a church picnic. A teen had brought in line skates. I said to myself I can roller skate. I think I will try it with these new fangled skates. I did great. Only fell once—but I broke my wrist. Three hours later my orthopedist arrived at the hospital. The conversation and experience is seared into my memory. Look, he said, I have to set your wrist. We could get an operating room and an anesthesiologist—but that will take a while. Local anesthesia really won't help. So I suggest you bite on this rubber mouthpiece and scream as loud as you can while I snap your wrist back into place. Screaming helps.

John the Baptist isn't messing around. God in Christ isn't messing around. The world is being snapped back into place. Christ's Kingdom has come to do battle to the death with the kingdom of Caesar, with the principalities and powers. Blood indeed will be shed. We will have to choose—who is Lord of our lives—who do we finally serve.

To love God is good—to fear God is better—but to love God while fearing God is best of all.

The fear of Christmas is a most precious gift to us all.