



The Middle East Initiative

Pray.
Learn.
Engage.

From Fear to Joy!

By Rev. Dr. Munther Isaac

Biblical Text

Luke 2:10-11

“Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”



Text Exegesis

In the Christmas narrative, we read about the fear of the shepherds. Imagine the scene: how in the silence and darkness of the night, the shepherds saw this glorious yet sudden vision. They were naturally afraid. Yet, I wonder if Luke was alluding to a more general fear that was prevalent in Palestine in Biblical times. We read in Luke’s introduction to the birth narrative many references to the yearnings and expectations of Israel, and how there was a reality of fear. We see this in the hymn of Zacharias in Luke 1 who prayed “to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him *without fear*.”

It is safe to say that fear was common in the days when Jesus was born. The people of the land were afraid of their occupiers, the unknown, or that God has forgotten them. They were afraid, and where there is fear, there is despair and slavery. When we are afraid, we become prisoners to our fears, chained in despair and hopelessness.

We see this reality of fear in our world today. Today in Palestine and in the midst of the occupation, many are afraid of the future. In places like Iraq and Syria, where Christians and other religious minorities are persecuted, the prayer of Zachariah is as relevant today as it was 2000 years ago: “...grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him *without fear*.” Even in places where there is

stability we encounter fear. In Europe and North America many are afraid of the refugees and migrants. Politicians are utilizing and encouraging this fear for selfish, evil reasons. Because of this fear, many Christians are not willing to serve and embrace the refugees, which is as close a thing to being Christ-like and following Jesus' teaching as you could get! Fear is causing many Christians to reject and in some cases hate others! Fear is a reality that is crippling our world today, and at the same time it is a reality that is damaging our Christian witness to that world.

Today, maybe more than ever, we need to hear and embrace the words of the angels: "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people."

Relating the Text to Today

There are at least three things that the Gospel is telling us today.

First, we fear not, because Jesus is born. The message of Christmas should drive fear away. The message that God sent his Son to be born here, to become one of us, to feel our pain and sorrows, and to ultimately carry our sins upon himself on the cross – this message should drive fear away.

"Fear not," but not because circumstances will change. "Fear not," not because you should trust in yourself. This is not "self-help." The message is not simply to have courage. "Fear not," because of what God is doing in and through Jesus Christ. Hope and salvation come from without, not from within. "My help comes from above, from the Lord."

This is not statement that the current political reality will change. Rather, a new kingdom reality is breaking through! A dawn of a new era is appearing. Interestingly, a similar statement with almost the same Greek words and sentence structure as the one we find in Luke 2:11 was known in Jesus' times about the birth of Augustus. Was Luke alluding to this? "Fear not," the new king is born. It is not Caesar, but Jesus. And his kingdom of love and joy challenges the kingdoms of the fear that dominate our world today.

Second, what is really interesting in the words of the angel is that fear is replaced with Joy – the joy of the Gospel. The opposite of fear is not security, but joy! Joy, not security, replaces fear. The promise of Christmas is not of security, wealth, or comfort, but the joy of the Gospel! The joy of knowing that God dealt with our sins and failures. The joy of realizing that God has remembered his covenant; of realizing that we are not forgotten. The joy of knowing that the baby of Bethlehem is the prince of peace and also the one who "with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth" (Isaiah 11:4).

Thirdly and finally, this is not a passive or naïve joy. This is not escapism. Joy is active and transformative. The joy of Christmas should transform our world and

reality and cause us to be ourselves agents of transformation and change. The shepherds received this joyful news of Jesus' birth and went to Bethlehem and met Jesus and the family, and then returned "glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them". Today we are invited to do the same.

Because Jesus is born, we are now free to love, serve, and worship him. Because he is born, we are no longer slaves to our fears. We "fear not," and with joy we love and serve the world. And when we serve with joy, when we are liberated from fear, only then we are able to love and embrace God and others.

In this Christmas season, we are invited to receive the words of the angels: "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people."

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