

A Fearful Christmas  
Luke 2:8-20; Matthew 2:16-18

As far as we can tell, Miss Harriette Person compiled her pageant and recruited local children to perform it for the first time at the Port Gibson library during the Christmas season in 1919. And as we all know, 1919 was not the best of years. Just a year earlier, in November of 1918, World War I had come to an end, but only after 10 million people had died, and another 20 million had been wounded. The United States alone had spent 52% of our gross national product on the war effort – the same percentage today would amount to \$10.8 trillion. 116,516 Americans lost their lives in the war, and another 320,518 had been wounded.

But even while the war still raged, what came to be known as the Spanish Flu came calling. First diagnosed in the spring of 1918, troop movements rapidly spread it around the world. By the summer of 1919, one third of the people on earth had been infected, and well over 20 million people perished worldwide. 675,000 died in the United States alone, over twice the number that have died from COVID up to this point, with a total population of only 1/3 of what we have today. Isolated outbreaks were still occurring in places like New York City and Detroit during the first performance of the pageant.

It was into such a context of horror and exhaustion that Miss Person's words rang with such force: "Child of God, forgive the blindness and the slaughter! Child of pity, calm the terror of the night!" And in the aftermath of our own still-contentious Federal election, with lawless riots breaking out in our streets, we can easily join our voices with hers in this first year in a century when our own pandemic has prevented the costumed children of our community from presenting her pageant.

But the terror of the night has always been part of Christmas. In fact, when the wise men showed up in Herod's court, saying that the King of the Jews had been born, Herod was not joyful but troubled. After all, he knew good and well that no one in his family had recently had a baby, so he must have been afraid that the wisemen somehow knew about a potential rival to his throne. And he took this possibility so seriously that, even though he probably did not share the wisemen's faith in the movements of the stars, and even though there is no way in which we can call him a man of faith in God, he took action. He took those strange astrologers' story about the stars and those Old Testament prophecies of the coming of a Messiah just seriously enough to hedge his bets.

That's why he asked the chief priests and scribes where the Messiah was supposed to be born. And that's why he passed along their answer – in Bethlehem of Judea – to the wise men, who otherwise would have had no idea where to find the newborn King.

But regardless of what he told the wisemen, Herod had no intention of worshipping the Child. No, because he was afraid of losing His power, he was planning instead to kill this potential claimant to the throne of David. And when the wisemen did not return to inform him of the identity and location of the Child they sought, Herod simply adopted scorched-earth tactics. He ordered his soldiers to find and kill any male child of the right age in Bethlehem. In short, Herod's fear led him to commit mass murder.

And so it was no accident that Miss Harriette Person featured the slaughter of the Bethlehem babes in her children's pageant. After all, she and all her young actors lived in a world whose crowned rulers had recently plunged it into war because of the same kinds of fears. For you see, World War I hadn't broken out because of any great moral principle. No, the Kaiser of Germany and the Czar of Russia and the Emperor of Austria-Hungary put their war plans into action simply because they were afraid of being caught flat-footed, afraid of being invaded by their rivals without having mobilized their own armies

first. So, yes, Miss Harriette and everyone else in 1919 knew just how deadly the combination of fear and power could be.

And haven't we tasted of the same poisonous brew in our own time? For how much of our recent electoral maelstrom has been motivated by fear? Oh, we might want to blame it on the press. After all, bad news has sold newspapers for years – "If it bleeds, it leads," the journalists used to say. And so it should come as no surprise that things which inspire fear – violent and scandalous events - continue to dominate our headlines. Especially in today's world of websites and social media, the best way to get more "clicks," and thus more advertising revenue, is to be provocative, shocking, even outrageous.

But our political parties have increasingly engaged in the same sort of fearmongering, encouraging their followers to fear and even to hate their opponents. And because we Americans have been polarized into opposing camps, our political parties find it easier than ever to persuade people to vote, not because they like their own party's candidate, but because they're simply afraid of what might happen if the other party gets control of the country. Fear of losing power still moves great men to desperate actions.

But before we go too far in bashing our politicians, isn't the same thing all too often true of us where it comes to our relationship with God? Oh, sure, we're perfectly happy to hear about how God has saved us by His grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. But are we just as eager to hear about how God's Word calls us to repentance? Are we just as willing to make changes in our lifestyles, or in our social calendars, or in our spending priorities, or in our entertainment choices when God's Word calls the way we live into question? Or do we try to weasel out of God's clear commands, desperate to remain in control over our own lives, pushing the parts of God's Word away that we find inconvenient, afraid of the changes He is calling us to make? Oh yes, like our modern politicians, like the kings of Europe in Harriette Person's time, and like Herod, we know what it's like to be afraid of losing power.

But there's another kind of fear we find in Miss Harriette's pageant, the kind of fear the Bethlehem shepherds experienced. For the first scene in the pageant tells of how an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before a group of shepherds, filling the night sky with the glory of the Lord shining all around them. It's no wonder that Luke tells us the shepherds were "sore afraid," terribly frightened. They had never seen anything like it before.

But other people had, and when you search the Scriptures you find that everyone who has had an encounter with an angel has experienced the same sort of fear. When Daniel first saw Gabriel, he was so frightened that he fell on his face to the ground. Years later, when Gabriel appeared to Mary, before he could give her the good news of the miraculous baby that would be born to her, he had to tell her the same thing the angels told the shepherds: don't be afraid.

So, why is it that angels always inspire such fear? Most obviously because they are not at all like the little children who traditionally play that part in our pageant, with their cute little robes and their glittering halos adorably askew. No, there's a reason that Luke 2:13 calls them the heavenly host, for in addition to being messengers of God's truth they are also warriors in God's army. And no matter what so many Christmas carols insist, Luke 2:13 doesn't say that they sang at all, but rather that they simply said, or perhaps more accurately shouted their praise of their divine commander. Angels thus inspire fear because of their tremendous power.

But they are also fearsome because of their perfect purity. For let's face it – even the best of us routinely operate from all sorts of mixed motives. If we're honest, we'll all admit that we struggle with sin, trying to overcome addictions or habits that we know aren't in accord with God's Word. We all have

a hard time really putting the needs of others ahead of our own desires. And none of us even come close to Jesus' supreme example of self-sacrificial, unconditional love. That's why even the prophet Daniel and even the virgin Mary found Gabriel such an unsettling presence. After all, when compared to a ruler or a plumbline, even the tallest, straightest tree in the forest is crooked and bent, and when compared to the purity of an angel, even the holiest saint looks like the worst of sinners.

But the good news is that a whole host of such mighty and holy angels came to the shepherds in Bethlehem and told them not to be afraid. And then they gave them the greatest reason that all of us have to put aside our fears – our fears of losing control, as well as our fears of divine power and purity: they announced that a baby had been born, and that he was lying in a manger in Bethlehem.

For what did the angels say about Him? That He was Christ the Lord. That means He was the rightful king, not only of Bethlehem and Jerusalem and the rest of Judea, but of the whole world. As Isaiah told us last week, He is the Prince of Peace, the One Who rules over everyone in perfect righteousness. Or as the angels shouted from Heaven, He has come to make peace between God and those with whom He is pleased.

So, why should we keep clinging to the illusion that are somehow in control of our lives? After all, unlike Herod, Jesus hasn't come to squash us because we're some sort of threat to Him. No, our King has come to us under a flag of truce, offering us peace. So why should we be afraid of surrendering to Him?

Moreover, King Jesus is not like those fearful, short-sighted European monarchs who pointlessly plunged the world into war in 1914. No, Isaiah assures us that His throne is built on perfect justice and righteousness. That means He possesses perfect wisdom and judgment. That means He never makes a mistake. So, surely Jesus can do a better job of directing our lives than we can, right? Surely He can't help but improve upon the mess we've made whenever we've followed our own sinful, selfish reason, or whenever we've allowed ourselves to be governed by our feelings or our fears. So, why not trust Him?

For He is not only our Lord Who rules in peace and justice – the angels also said that He is our Savior. And that means He hasn't come to put us down because of our inadequacies and failures, but to deliver us from them. So instead of being afraid of Him because of the sin that continues to stain us and hold us back, why not surrender all of it to Him? Why not let Him wash us clean with His own blood, taking all our sin upon Himself and giving us only His perfect, spotless righteousness in return? Why not trust Him?

For it turns out that surrendering to Jesus is the key to transforming all our fears into joy. For think about it. Even though what the angels told the shepherds didn't make any sense to them, even though it didn't make any sense that a world-dominating monarch would be born to poor parents taking shelter in a stable, even though it didn't make any sense that the spotless Savior of the world would be laid in a feedbox for animals, the shepherds received the sign the angels gave them. And then they put aside their fears and went to see the impossible sight. And then they did the same thing the angels did, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen.

And that's what Miss Harriette called the citizens of Port Gibson to do back in that terrible year of 1919. Instead of bowing down to a helmet and a crown, instead of living in fear of the same sorts of leaders that had so recently plunged the world into war, instead of giving in to the terror of the night, the fear of a pandemic continuing to stalk the land, she called all of us to heed the Child of Heaven. She called us to do the hard work of choosing joy in the face of fear. She called us to do the work of charity, loving those who are lonely or sick or in need. And she called us to join the shepherds and the angels, singing the praise of the God Who is our King and our Savior.

So, let's lay down our fears and take up our hymnals, singing the praise of the King born in Bethlehem, the everlasting Lord, the Prince of Peace, the incarnate Deity, Jesus our Immanuel, God with us. We'll sing all the stanzas of Hark the Herald Angels Sing, in your hymnals as number 106, and also in your online order of service.