

December 25, 2005

CHRISTMAS DAY MEDITATION
FEAR NOT
Luke 2: 1-20

“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 Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord’.” (Luke 2: 10-11)

I believe that the predominant feeling in our culture today is fear, not anger, not guilt, not love, not joy, but fear. The basic message of our culture is, “Be frightened”. When we travel on public transportation the mere presence of security systems characterize our fear. Our first reaction when a stranger approaches us in a public place is fear.

We are in the foxhole of fear together.

The foxhole we are in together is the fear that we, or someone we love or even just someone we know will be victims of the next terrorist attack. We are afraid of the terror to come because of our painful memories of the terror that has so recently passed.

We are also together in the foxhole of personal fear. It is the foxhole of fear about the lump in your breast; the foxhole of fear about your addictions, your illness, your business problems, the problems in your marriage or the problems in your children's or grandchildren's lives. We need to find ways to conquer our personal debilitating intimate fears every bit as much as the world needs to find Osama bin Laden.

Fear sells car alarms and security systems. Fear sells guns. Fear causes population shifts as refugees move across international borders and as city dwellers head to the suburbs. Fear causes deep personal anxiety. There is something paralyzing about fear, something that reduces the scope of our lives, the extent of our love, the depth of our passion, the generosity of our

giving.

Christian faith is about: "Fear not." And it is the primary, fundamental, and persistent message of the Bible. It is commanded over 122 times in the Old Testament and another couple of hundred times in the New Testament, and that commandment from God is, "Be not afraid". If you Google "be not afraid" you get millions of matches.

Remember a time when, as a child, you were frightened: maybe lying in bed, sure that the shadows on the wall were of a monster hiding and the bumps and creaks on the stairway were the signs of something dreadful about to happen. And totally panicked, you called out to our father or mother, who appeared and took you and held you close in his or her lap and said, "Everything is all right. Don't be afraid." That is what Christian faith is about.

When Moses is becoming nervous about the dangers of leading his people out of Egypt, God says, "Fear not. I will be with you."

To a frightened nation, quaking before the might of a cruel and overwhelmingly powerful enemy: "Fear not. I will be with you."

To any who face the ultimate threat to life: "Even though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me."

To terrified shepherds startled in the middle of the night by a bright light and angel choruses: "Fear not."

And when Jesus had been crucified, to frightened disciples at an open tomb: "Fear not. He is not here. He is risen."

Faith is *not* knowing what you did not know before. Rather, faith is believing what you did not believe before, and the core of that belief is the belief that because of God's love, God's help and God's presence in your life, you have nothing to fear.

The prophet Isaiah conveys God's words of commandment and comfort: "Say to them that are of a fearful heart, Be strong, fear not" (Isaiah 35:4). "Fear you not; for I am with you: be not dismayed; for I am your God: I will strengthen you; yea, I will help you; yea, I will uphold you with the right hand of my righteousness." (Isaiah 41:10).

A commandment is not a real commandment until what is commanded becomes part of us – until it is what we do and what we say. When it is said it is just a commandment, but when it is lived it becomes the secret of real life.

What God commanded to them then, God is commanding us now. What God is commanding us is that we have courage in the face of fear, and that we draw that courage from hope, and that we draw that hope from faith in God. Believing in God gives us hope. Hope gives us courage, and courage kills fear. That is one of the secrets of real life.

God speaks to those of us who are well but fear becoming ill. God speaks to those of us who are ill and who fear that they may die of their illness. God speaks to those who know they are dying and fear death. God tells each of us to be not afraid. God is the reason we hope and trust personally in a tomorrow whose shape we can neither predict nor control, but somehow because of our faith in God's promise, we need not fear.

Thank be to God who gives us courage to live day by day! Amen!