

There are some real advantages to being a Christian that people outside of the faith don't recognize. Christians have the assurance of God's love and forgiveness. Our lives have meaning and purpose. We know our eternal destination. But that is not all. Because we know that God loves us and is with us, we can find hope in Him in times of fear.

This is certainly a time of fear in our nation. Some people are afraid of failure. Others are afraid of rejection. Almost all of us are afraid of getting more bad news. Sometimes I think a warning label should come on before a news broadcast stating "Watching this program may be hazardous to your mental health." How many more reports do we need about the swine flu, unemployment or the poor economy? I'm not saying that we should never watch the news or that we should bury our heads in the sand like an ostrich; but I am saying that it is easy to be overcome by all of the bad news that is out there.

Fear is a reality of life. Fear that is left unchecked can take control of us. Fear has a way of corroding our self confidence. It can fill us with doubts that make us ask, "Why doesn't God do something about this?" It can also make us angry. When people are afraid, they can bark and growl at other people just because they are close by. We can take our fears out on others. But that only makes matters worse. When fear takes up residence in our hearts it kicks out clear thinking, confidence and compassion for others. Fear locks us in a prison of depression and despair.

Sometimes fear can be a good thing if it is the type of fear that gets us out of a burning building or keeps us a child from running out into traffic after a bouncing ball. But fear is not a good thing when it takes control of our lives. I've never heard anyone say:

- My fears put such a spring in my step.
- I'd be a rotten parent if it wasn't a hypochondriac.
- Thank God for my pessimism. I've been such a better person since I lost hope.
- My doctor says that if I don't start worrying, I'll lose my health.

But that doesn't prevent people from living in fear. Have you ever met anyone like this?

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Faith is the key. The Christian life isn't about finding freedom from fear; but about finding God's presence in times of fear. Matthew 8 tells about a situation just like that. The disciples had set out with Jesus in a small fishing boat to cross the Sea of Galilee. Jesus fell asleep before a sudden, furious storm came up that threatened to sink the boat. The disciples were so afraid that they were going to drown that they woke Jesus up. Jesus looked at them and asked, "Why are

you so afraid.” Then He ordered the wind and the waves to stop, and they did. He calmed the storm at sea. He can do the same for you and me.

Maybe by now you are asking yourself what does this have to do with the Advent / Christmas Season? After all, we are here tonight for an Advent service. The answer is this. There are at least four times in the Gospel of Matthew and Luke that an angel of the Lord appeared to people before or on the first Christmas. Zechariah was afraid in the temple when Gabriel appeared to him. Mary was afraid in Nazareth when Gabriel appeared to her. The angel who appeared to Joseph in a dream told him not to be afraid. And the angel who announced the birth of Jesus to the Bethlehem Shepherds told them not to fear. God’s message is “Don’t be afraid.” In each situation God helped them deal with their fears so that they could hear the Good News. And after they heard the Good News, they were ready to take the risk, to do what God told them to do.

Did you know that Jesus addresses the topic of fear 21 times in the four Gospels. 21 times he said things like don’t be afraid, take heart, or have courage. That’s more times than he told the disciples to love God and to love others. When God is with us, fear doesn’t have control of our lives. 2 Timothy 1:7 tells us, ***“For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline.”*** (NLT)

When Jesus is in the boat with us, He handles the great storms in our lives with a great calm. He gives us the peace that the world cannot give. He gives us confidence that He can work everything out for our good because He loves us. He gives us hope that won’t disappoint us.

When fear comes knocking at your door, and it will, don’t invite it in for dinner. Don’t give it a bed to sleep in overnight. Instead turn to the Lord in faith. Let him calm the storms that come up in your life and replace your fears with faith. As long as Jesus is with us, we have nothing to be afraid of. After all, as 1 John 4:18 tells us, ***“There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear.”*** Let God give you His hope in this, His season of love. Amen.