

This is the most wonderful time of the year, or is it? Did you every pay attention to the last couple of lines in the first verse of "Oh Little Town of Bethlehem"? It ends this way, "Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light; the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." What do hope and fears have to do with each other? Maybe more than we think.

Fear plays a major part in the first Christmas story. It seems like every time an angel appears with a message from God, the angel first has to tell the person "Don't be afraid." It happened with Zechariah, Mary, Joseph and the Shepherds. I'm sure most if not all of us would be afraid if an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared right now. Mary certainly had reason to be afraid as a single Mom in a very legalistic culture. Joseph had to be afraid about any decision he made. What if Mary was telling the truth? What if she wasn't?

Fear didn't end after Jesus was born. The excitement and expectations of the season can also bring on a lot of fear. One blogger said last year that her life was filled with fear, not joy. She was freaking out about ...

- Whether she forgot to get a gift for anyone she would be seeing on Christmas,
- Whether she bought adequate gifts for her co-workers,
- Whether her children have an equal amount of presents to open,
- Whether she messed up the name tags and gave the wrong gifts to her boys,
- Whether her youngest will think that Santa thought he was a bad boy this year,
- Whether her husband would like his gifts and
- Whether she has money left over to cover for those she forgot.

Maybe you can identify with some of these fears.

Chapman College came out with their annual survey of fears that Americans have. The top of the list for the fourth year in a row is the fear of corrupt government officials. That is followed by environmental fears, the fear of bad things happening to a loved one, financial and health concerns.

John the Baptist, who was sent to prepare the way for Jesus, stirred up fear in the hearts of many. John said, "***Even now the ax of God's judgment is poised, ready to sever the roots of the trees. Yes, every tree that does not produce good fruit will be chopped down and thrown into the fire.***" (Luke 3:9 NLT) That should have been scary enough for those who heard him. John was sent to prepare the way for Jesus by calling people to repentance and faith. But no one is going to repent unless they know they need to do it and they will be forgiven.

But fear is not the final word. God promised through the Prophet Ezekiel that He would look for and restore His scattered people. He also promises to forgive our sins and forget about them. God

gives us this promise from Zephaniah, ***“The Lord himself, the King of Israel, will live among you! At last your troubles will be over, and you will never again fear disaster.”*** (3:15 NLT)

Sometimes we have to pass through our fears to get to joy. The hopes and fears of all the years met that night in Bethlehem when Jesus was born. There are bad things that happen in life, things that lead to fear. Things like illness, poverty, pain, suffering, natural disasters, violence, loneliness, desertion and death. Yet these fears are only temporary. They can stand up against God’s great plan for the world and for the people He loves.

God put His Plan into play right after Adam and Eve disobeyed His command and brought sin with all its deadly consequences into the world. God promised a Savior to Adam and Eve, but they faced the fear of being separated from God and living outside the Garden. God repeated and clarified that promise over the years. God promised to bless everyone through Abraham. But Abraham lived in fear that he would not have an heir. God promised the Savior would come from the line of King David. But David lived in fear that God would judge him for his unconfessed sins of adultery and murder. God told Isaiah that the Savior would be the son of a Virgin and that He would suffer and die to pay for the sins of the world. But the people at Isaiah’s time were afraid that the nation would be conquered before the promised Savior would be born.

God fulfilled His plan by sending His Son into the world. Jesus is the promised Immanuel, God with us to save us. Jesus’ Disciple John wrote, ***“This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins.”*** (1 John 4:10 NLT) The manger could not hold Jesus. The cross could not hold Jesus either. His grave is empty. The charges against us have been paid in full. The only place that Jesus wants to stay is in our hearts and lives. The Holy Spirit calls us to faith and gives us the gift of faith.

So we are children of God through faith in Jesus Christ. Our sins have been forgiven by Christ. Our guilt and shame have been removed. When Jesus appeared to His Disciples after His resurrection he said to them, “Do not be afraid.” He says the same to us. God’s perfect love overcomes our fears. We don’t need to be afraid of judgment and condemnation. Jesus died in our place. We don’t need to be afraid of being alone. Nothing can separate us from God’s love for us in Jesus Christ. We have a place in God’s family forever.

Because Jesus entered our world that first Christmas with the Good News of Great Joy for all people, this is the time when our fears can give way to joy.

Joy to the world, the Lord is come!  
Let every heart prepare Him room,  
And heav’n and nature sing,

Let earth receive her King;  
And heav’n and nature sing,  
And heav’n, and heav’n, and nature sing.