

“Don’t Be Afraid”

(Luke 2.1-14)

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Introduction

Ancient societies believed *any* unusual happenings in the night sky, were a portent of great upheavals coming to the world of ‘men’. Ordinary people were not only at the mercy of their lords and masters, but totally vulnerable to the fickle whims of the gods. ‘Signs in the heavens’ were therefore greeted with alarm and anxiety... *‘What looming disaster does this foretell?’* Hence the terror of the shepherds, who witness the ‘glory of the Lord’ in the night skies outside Bethlehem... *‘What upheaval does this mean for us?’* And so the first words of the angel, God’s messenger, are *‘Fear not! This is good news! There’s no need to be afraid!’*

‘Fear not!’... as the traditional translations render it. This is the *third* time we’ve heard these words from the mouth of an angel in the short birth narratives. They were said to Mary... and then later to Joseph. No ‘portents in the heavens’ for them – *just* this unexpected and unexplainable pregnancy! For Mary and Joseph, the ‘great upheaval’ is already upon them – the disgrace, the scandal, the dramatic overturning of their normal lives and expected trajectory – is happening to them *now*! At its heart it’s the same anxiety the shepherds experience. *‘What does God want of me?’*

“Fear not” says the angel... *‘This is good news. There’s no need to be afraid.’*

Fear Of God

Rowan Williams says,

*“‘Fear not’ is a significant reminder that the overwhelming news of God the Saviour’s coming... is both all that the human heart could hope for... **and** also something that powerfully disrupts the way the world goes... and the way our lives go. There is*

something to be afraid of in the renewal of a world: I may not welcome being reconstructed or interrupted.”¹

Waking up to the reality of God’s presence is not necessarily the comfort we expect – it actually triggers *fear*.

We all know fear. We live in a society drenched in it! There’s a long long list of things that frighten us – terrorism, immigrants, Islam, declining living standards, economic collapse, climate change, house prices, the Chinese... Donald Trump! And many of us know anxiety as a crippling influence in our personal life. There *are* so many things to worry about... and if not ourselves, it’s anxiety for our children. But this is *not* the only fear the Christ-child story is addressing...

The story of Christ’s birth is speaking to the human fear... that comes in response to the presence of God becoming real in our lives... As children we happily assume that God is like a kind, generous and distant uncle... or perhaps even a magic cosmic vending machine stocked with our wishes... there to serve us at our request. But if we stay with this faith-business into adulthood, we come across the disturbing reality that the relationship is two-way... and that God does indeed require behavioural change... even sacrificial change... from us.

In the church culture of the early 60’s, there was *still* a declining number of teenage boys... and we knew to keep this God-business at a distance... because if we got too close, God would require something *really* horrible of us... to become a priest... or even worse, to go to Africa as a missionary! I escaped *that* particular horror by choosing the lesser of the two sacrifices – to be a priest, where at least it seemed I could have *something* like a normal life. But then in the following years, I became terrified that God would ask me to be celibate... a fate worse than death at that time! I’ve seen this repeat in many people... At that point where they actually realise that God is *not* an invention of their wish-fantasies, not a child’s comforter, but a Spirit that demands engagement and response... the first instinct is almost always fear. ‘*What will God require of me? What will this upheaval mean in my life?*’ And fascinatingly, the fear will generally latch onto something so dramatic, so counter our wishes, that it feels like violence... like an assault on who we are. The anxiety is, that God will so overturn our lives that we, as the person we are, will cease to be recognisable.

¹ All the Rowan Williams’ quotations in this sermon come from his 2003 Christmas sermon.

Rowan Williams says that a big part of this fear, is assuming that God is a foreign power waiting to take over our lives by force... by compulsion. Our traditional language almost suggests this – *God descending on us from above!* Rowan uses the violent metaphor of war... where a foreign country occupies our land, doing irreparable damage in taking control. I think of that horror movie genre... *'Invasion of the Body Snatchers'* and the like, where aliens implant themselves in human bodies and use the shells for their evil purposes. It is a fear that we will be taken over by an entity that is not of us... an outside spirit that will make us do things we don't want to do... that will rob us of our identity.

It is the fear of the shepherds – *'Where will this commotion in the heavens take us... what will we lose in this upheaval?'* It is the fear of Mary and Joseph... *'This divinely inspired pregnancy, which wasn't our idea at all, will take us somewhere we don't want to go.'* It is my early-life fear – *'That God would require me to live a lonely and unfulfilled life.'* That's the fear... *'If I open myself to the reality of God present and active in my life, what will He demand of me?'*

It is this fear that the angels speaks to... *'Fear not! This is good news! There's no need to be afraid!'*

God Is With Us As One Of Us

And this is the fear the nativity story speaks to... this wild incredible story of God choosing to be born as a human child. Rowan Williams again...

"When God comes among us, he doesn't first of all clear humanity out of the way so that he can take over; he becomes a human being. He doesn't force his way in to dominate and crush; he announces his arrival in the sharp, hungry cry of a newborn baby."

This business of the Christ-child, the baby, is not to encourage mawkish sentimentality (so prevalent at Christmas), but rather to tell us that God comes... in human history and in our lives... **as one of us!** God comes... not as a foreign power but as one of us; a baby, cradled in the love of a mother and father, totally dependent on human care... just like us!

And the good news is this... Our failed and soiled humanity *is* still capable of carrying the divine spirit. No matter how battered, tired, resistant and afraid we feel... *this* body, mind, heart and soul of ours, *can* be a sacred vessel for the divine. It *is* possible for fearful hearts to open, to receive and revive the Spirit of God within.

Now the story moves beyond scary to exciting... For Christ comes to us as one of us, so the scales may fall from our eyes... and we might recognise our true reality and our true destiny. Rather than taking us over and forcing us to be something we are not, Christ comes to us as one of us, so we might discover our true selves. Christ comes to us as one of us, in order that we may follow him home, to the unimaginable abundance of life... that can only come from intimate union with our Creator.

'Fear not! This is good news! There's no need to be afraid!'