

BACK TO THE BIBLE SERIES: A Hope-Filled Christmas

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If I could take one word that seems to describe a lot of people this Christmas season, maybe the word I would choose would be the word “fear”. I was talking to a banker, and he said he’s never seen so much fear in people. I understand that; I think there is good reason to be afraid. The economy is shaky at best. Wars and terrorism seem to be on the rise. It seems like it’s a new disease every week. There are people saying we’re destroying the planet. I think there’s every reason to be fearful...unless the story of Christmas is true. If the story of Christmas is true, that changes everything. Isn’t the message of the angels that night, “Fear Not”? If you have a Bible, turn with me to Luke, Chapter 2...a familiar passage.

Starting in Verse 1:

Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. And everyone was on his way to register for the census, each to his own city. Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, in order to register, along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child. While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. She gave birth to her first-born son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which shall be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. (*NASB, Luke 2:1:11)

That first Christmas night the angels said, “Fear Not”. Why? Because ... “unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” Jesus, the long-awaited Messiah, God in the flesh, has come. Now you might say, “I think those words were just for the shepherds that night.” Really? I think they said, “This is a message for all people for all time.” You see, if the story of Christmas is true, it changes everything. Let’s skip ahead six chapters to Luke Chapter 8...six chapters but thirty years. It’s interesting when you read through the Gospels how many times this issue of fear comes up, and how many times you find Jesus saying in one way or another, “Hey, what are you afraid of? It’s Me; I’m here. Because I’m here there’s no reason to be afraid.” It comes up over and over again.

Luke Chapter 8, starting in verse 22:

Now on one of those days... (I love the way this story starts; we all have “those” days). Now on one of those days, Jesus and His disciples got into a boat, and He said to them, “Let us go over to the other side of the lake.” And so, they launched out. But as they were sailing along, He fell asleep; and a fierce gale of wind descended upon the lake, and they began to be swamped and to be in danger. They came to Jesus and woke Him up, saying, “Master, Master, we are perishing!” And He got up and rebuked the wind and the surging waves, and they stopped, and it became calm. And He said them, “Where is your faith?” They were fearful and amazed, saying to one another, “Who then is this, that He commands even the winds and the waves, and they obey Him?” (Luke 8:22-25)

It was one of “those” days when they got in a boat and headed across the Sea of Galilee. It is good to remind ourselves these weren’t amateur fishermen; these were professionals. They made their living on the water. If there was anyone who knew what they were doing in a boat, it was these men. The storm comes up and they begin to become concerned and it moves quickly to a state of panic. Because they were professionals, they knew what to do in a storm, but they also knew when it was time to panic. In the opinion of these professionals, “We’re going down!” So, they wake Jesus up and they ask Him the question, “Hey, don’t You care? We’re perishing here.” It’s pretty tempting to ask that question in the storms of life, isn’t it? “Hey Jesus, You might want to wake up; I think the ship’s going down.” Jesus wakes up; He calms the storm, looks them in the eye and asks the question, “Where is your faith?” It’s an interesting question. He didn’t ask them “why” they had such little faith. The question is, “Where is your faith?” The question points to the object of their faith. In other words what Jesus was saying is, “Obviously your faith is not in Me or you wouldn’t be fearful, so where is your faith?” Their faith was in themselves; they were professionals. This was their area of strength. If anybody could handle it, they could.

It’s a good question to think about. If you find yourself struggling with fear, I would ask you the question, “Where is your faith?” because it’s hard to imagine your faith could be in Jesus if there is fear in your heart. I think that is part of what we have learned: that we do put our faith in our bank accounts, we do put our faith in the market, we do put our faith in the government, we do put our faith in our abilities and skills; we do put our faith in ourselves. That is why we are fearful, because we are not up to the task. When the storms come on and the boat is going down, at that moment we know we don’t have what we need to survive the storm. What Jesus was saying is, “Men, don’t you realize that God is asleep in your boat. If God is in your boat, you’ve got nothing to fear.” They were still trying to figure this out. It says that after Jesus calmed the storm, they asked the question, “Who is this man that even the wind and the waves obey Him?” They hadn’t yet understood the implications that when Jesus is in your boat, there is nothing to be afraid of.

The stories that follow are intended to answer the question: “Who then is this man?” Well, this is who He is:

Verse 26:

Then they sailed to the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. And when He came out onto the land, He was met by a man from the city who was possessed with demons; and he had not put on any clothing for a long time, and was not living in a house, but in the tombs. Seeing Jesus, he cried out and fell before Him, and said in a loud voice, "What business do we have with each other, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg You, do not torment me." For He had been commanding the unclean spirit to come out of the man. For it had seized him many times; and he was bound with chains and shackles and kept under guard; and yet he would break his bonds and be driven by the demon into the desert. And Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Legion"; for many demons had entered him. They were imploring Him not to command them to go into the abyss. Now there was a herd of many swine feeding there on the mountain; and the demons implored Him to permit them to enter the swine. And He gave them permission. And the demons came out of the man and entered the swine; and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned. And when the herdsman saw what had happened, they ran away and reported it in the city and out in the country. And the people went out to see what had happened; and they came to Jesus and found the man from whom the demons had gone out, sitting down at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind; and they became frightened. Those who had seen it reported to them how the man who was demon possessed had been made well. And the people of the country of the Gerasenes and the surrounding district asked Him to leave them; for they were gripped with great fear; and He got into the boat and returned. But the man from whom the demons had gone out was begging Him that he might accompany Him; but He sent him away, saying, "Return to your house and describe what great things God has done for you." And he went away, proclaiming throughout the whole city what great things Jesus had done for him. (Vs. 26-39)

This is one of my favorite stories in all the Gospels. It is one my favorite stories because it is so filled with hope. I can't imagine a more hopeless situation; I can't imagine anybody more desperate. I can't imagine that you work with anyone worse off than this man. I can't imagine that any of your sons and daughters is worse off than this man. We tend to dehumanize these stories, so it's important to remind ourselves this was a person. He had a mom and a dad. He may very well have been married, may have had children, certainly had friends, people that loved him. And it had to be an absolute agony, watching this day after day after day. How would you like to be a mother watching your son chained like a madman in the tombs? And on occasion the demons would rage, and he would literally break his bonds and flee into the desert, until he could be captured, brought back, and chained up again. Imagine the despair of that day after day after day!

I saw a similar situation years ago when I went to Thailand and crossed the river and went into Laos. We went into a number of villages up into the jungle visiting the Tai-Dam people, and while we were there, we noticed a young man, probably in his late teens, literally chained to a tree. We asked why he was chained to a tree, and they said, "Because he's a madman. He's possessed by a spirit, and when he's let loose, he's so violent to his mother and to other people in the village, we have to keep him chained to a tree." "How long has he been there?" "For several years, and he will stay there until he dies." As we were watching, his mom brought a plate of food and she shuffled up as close as she could get, put the plate of food on a stump that was there, and quickly backed away. You could see the absolute despair in her eyes over her madman son.

You get just a sense of what these people must have felt for the man in this story. But then he has an encounter with God in the flesh, the long-awaited Messiah, the Savior of the world. And in a matter of moments, he was changed from a madman, a lunatic, to a missionary of the Gospel... because that's what Jesus does. It just takes a touch of His hand and everything changes. I'm sure there are some of you that live in your own bondage. Your addiction might be to alcohol, pornography, some drug, an eating disorder...maybe the bondage is just your stuff in the past. I don't know. You may feel in your heart it's hopeless, that it's never going to change. See, that's the whole point of the Christmas story: that the Savior of the world has come! All it takes is the touch of His hand. He's got the power to change you in a matter of minutes...from whatever it is that holds you in bondage, to a missionary of the Gospel. That's what He does! Some of you have a marriage that's unraveling; you have a son or a daughter who's gone down a bad path; it all seems so hopeless and you're ready to give it up. This story reminds us that there is no such thing as hopeless. Every day is a reason for hope. There is no one beyond the reach of God's life-changing power.

It always saddens my heart when I read the part in the story when the people came out to see the madman...in his right mind, sitting at the feet of Jesus. But they don't know what to do with this. It so frightens them that they want Jesus to leave. "Hey, pack up your stuff and get out of here." How many people in that region do you suppose were lame? ...were blind? ...were deaf? ...were sick? ...were dying? ...were living in absolute despair? And they had Jesus, God in the flesh, right there! And instead of experiencing His life-changing power, they invited him to leave, that they would continue to live in their bondage.

There are a lot of people at Christmas just like that. They just don't get the story. They just don't understand why Jesus came. They live their lives in bondage every day and the answer is right there. It plays over the speakers in almost every store, in almost every Christmas carol. The answer has come! Your life could be changed in a moment...everything you're looking for...but all they can think to say is, "Go away; go away."

You know, I see a lot of people laughing at the story of Christmas. They think it's silly. The story of God in the flesh to them is as silly as the story of Santa Claus himself. But I've noticed something over the years. Those people who laugh at the story of Christmas are the same people that live each day in fear; they are the same people! You see, if the story of Christmas is not true, you should be afraid, because you've got nowhere else to turn. I'd be afraid too. But if your faith is in Jesus, I've got to ask you, "What are you afraid of? What are you afraid of?"

Cara: Bryan, you leave us with a very uncomfortable question, "What am I afraid of?" And I actually think it would be good to just make a list and look at it in black and white. For me, it is just trusting God with my kids. So, just letting go of them, trusting that He has their future in His hands. And in the end, all of our concerns are legitimate concerns. But I've already agreed that Jesus is the captain of my ship, and He needs to steer it.

Bryan: Yeah. So, nobody's questioning the fact that they're legitimate concerns, but I think the question then is, okay, but now what? How does worry change anything? How does it fix anything? Most things that are legitimate concerns I can't fix, I can't change. All I can do is trust.

That's a choice I make. The question from Luke Eight is, "Where is your faith?" And I think it's asking, "Is it in yourself or is it in Jesus?"

Arnie: You know, Bryan, I did a lot of sports fishing; I crewed on fishing boats, growing up. And then on my own boat we did a lot of fishing. And what you said about fishermen being professionals, they know their stuff. So, for them to freak out, it wasn't like they were just making up drama. They knew what was going to happen and they were terrified.

Bryan: Yeah, absolutely. It was a legitimate threat. So again, the question isn't whether or not it was a real threat. The question is, "Okay, it's a real threat. Now what?" It's a really - I don't mean that to sound like kind of a smarty-head - but it's like, "Okay, now what? Shall we just worry about it? Is that going to stop the storm?" So, the fear is real, but now what are we going to do? And the answer is, "Well, I'm going to trust Jesus." And a good question there is, "What would be plan B?" It's like, there isn't a plan B. That's what I have; "I'm going to trust Jesus."

Cara: Peace is a popular theme of Christmas, but there's a big difference between God's peace and world peace. World peace is about the tranquility and calmness of a situation. God's peace transcends all of that. In fact, He allows us to experience peace in the midst of any situation.

Bryan: That's exactly right. I often chuckle at the song, Silent Night – Christmas song - beautiful song. I love the song, but you just think about it, that first Christmas, I don't think it was a silent night. It was full of chaos and fear and worry. All that was going on, but what you said is true. The world defines peace as kind of that absence of war. It's this Christmas Eve moment, with the candles and everything's kind of quiet and tranquil. But the peace that God offers is actually peace in the midst of the storm. And I would suggest it's when we're in the midst of the storm, we are most thankful for what we understand to be true. And that's where our peace comes from.

Arnie: So many of our listeners are dealing with death, disease, disappointment, and really absolute despair, especially this time of year. How do they see Jesus through all of this?

Bryan: Yeah, so, I heard somebody once define peace as the possession of adequate resources. So, no matter what we're going through, Jesus is enough. And I need to believe that; I have to take it by faith. But at the end of the story, Jesus wins and we win with Him. So, our hope is not primarily in this world. It never has been. So how I have to believe by faith, I have to believe God tells the truth. But one of the verses I really like with that is Hebrews 11:6 ...those who come to God must believe that He is, and He is a rewarder of those who seek Him. I think what that verse is saying is, you believe God tells the truth and then God will meet you in that belief and will confirm to you that it is indeed true. So, I don't think it's just we're hoping this is true. I think you believe God tells the truth. You act accordingly. And I've experienced this a lot in my own life - God meets you there and He confirms through His Spirit in your soul, that what He says is true, and you know that it's going to be okay.