

Fearing and Fearing Not

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Shortly before his assassination Martin Luther King Jr. wrote his mother about the next sermon he was planning to preach. He was entitling it, "Why America May Go to Hell." We may wonder what he would have said had he lived to preach that sermon, or why he was kept from preaching it. Was it that God did not want America to know? And why not? Because there is no hell, at least for America? Or was it rather that if King had preached his sermon, if even all the preachers in America had preached it, America would not have heard it anyway? Could not have heard it? Has America lost the ability to fear God — not the ability to fear, mind you, but the ability to fear God? The worse for us.

And the worse for our Christmases. No wonder we Americans fret so about Christmas. For we fear everything else about Christmas except the One who is truly frightening: the Christmas God. Instead we fear that Christmas has become too pagan or too commercialized or too busy or too soon, all of which it is of course. So we tinker with the celebrations. We even try to "put the Babe back into Christmas," as indeed we should. But putting the Babe back means putting the fear of God back into Christmas. Now if anything sounds un-American, that does. What could the Christmas Baby possibly have to do with the fear of God?

Well, to begin with, take the Christmas shepherds. Luke says of them, "They were filled with fear." And "fear" by the way means just that. It does not mean awe or reverence. That much is clear even without knowing Greek. For the very next thing the angel says to the shepherds, also in English, is "Do not be afraid." Surely that did not mean, "Do not be reverential," "Stop feeling awe." The newer translations say the shepherds "were terrified." And well they might be. Shepherds, as a lot, were not exactly saints. Like most of us they had plenty to hide. But then suddenly the lights come on. "The glory of the Lord shone around them." Their cover is blown. Add to that the Lukan pun: "Shepherds" can also symbolize "pastors," huddled with their "flocks" under cover of darkness. My fellow clergy will understand why, if the "glory of the Lord" suddenly exposed our ministries, we too might fear (as the Greek says) "a mega-fear " We might, that is, if we had the shepherds' rare gift of fearing God.

Or is this a misreading of the Christmas story? After all, weren't the shepherds promptly told not to fear? Doesn't that prove that their fear was groundless? On the contrary, what better grounds could their fear possibly have had? It was exactly on target. It was "the glory of the Lord" which they feared, not something else, not some lesser idol. Else they would not have been told they need fear no longer. That is said only to those who first of all do fear God. Only because the Lord was the One they feared were they then released from their fear. Otherwise not.

For instance, elsewhere Luke reports that the religious authorities feared "the people." But from that fear the Lord grants the fearers no relief. Similarly we are told that the disciples fear the authorities. For that fear they are faulted, not comforted. Likewise when they are at sea in a storm, they fear drowning. For that they are rebuked. Yet when their master stills the storm, they suddenly face someone truly terrifying, "Who is this that even the winds and the sea obey him?" For that fear they are not rebuked.

Had Dr. King lived to tell, might he have told us what Jesus did, that we are not to fear those who merely kill bodies but are rather to fear the One who "can destroy both body and soul in hell?" "Yes, I tell you, fear him," the Lukan Jesus adds for good measure. And Luke's gospel is supposedly the kinder, gentler of the gospels. It is the same Luke whose gentle Mary, in her Magnificat, sings of that One whose "mercy is for those who fear him." That mercy was reserved for the likes of her ("the angel said, 'Do not be afraid, Mary'") and for her "terrified" old in-law ("Do not be afraid, Zechariah") and for the "terrified" shepherds ("the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid'.") But then these folks were exceptional. They were fearers of God.

In Augsburg in 1530 some reform-minded Catholics (later called Lutherans), all of them laypeople, had been summoned by the emperor to explain their doctrine, for example, what they were teaching about sin. Every sinner, they answered, is congenitally unable to fear God — not just to trust God but to fear God, not just unwilling but unable. In describing sin so drastically these confessors had scripture on their side, also the best catholic tradition, maybe even some clinical evidence. God, true God, is humanly impossible to fear, seeing how beset we are with other fears — unless we are like the shepherds. The clinicians among us have known patients who appeared at first to dread God but on closer acquaintance turned out to be dreading a figment of God, perhaps a tyrannical parent, an idol. Worse yet is the pietistic fallacy that imagines God-fearing can be self-induced. Faked? Maybe. Induced? No. Worst of all, I think, is that sort of shallow "spirituality" which simply dismisses the fear of God as morbid. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was right about American mainline religion, that it is "Protestantism without the Reformation."

But if the fear of God is not morbid, we owe it to one another, to America, to explain why it isn't. Again, consider Luke. Throughout his gospel — also in his second volume, the book of Acts — what is it about God that enables some sinners to fear God? Finally, it is God's mercy. That is hardly morbid. True, along with God's mercy there is also a show of might: stilling the tempest, granting pregnancy to post-menopausal Elizabeth and Mary the virgin, lighting up the Judean dark. But that is always might in the service of mercy. In every case it is the strong God showering upon undeserving sinners some magnificent, unexpected favor. But is it that, God's kindness, which makes beneficiaries afraid of their benefactor? Not kindness alone but in the end, yes, it is kindness. Put it in terms of law and gospel: God-fearing is something which the law, at best, can initiate but only the gospel can complete.

Remember Luke's account of the widow of Nain. What was it that Jesus did at her son's funeral which terrified the mourners? Did he thunder at them for their sin? Not this time.

Did he warn them about hell, as on occasion he could do? No, the Lord "had compassion" and said "Don't cry" and then raised the dead boy back to life. Then first, not before, "fear seized them all." Then first did it dawn on them that God was "visiting his people" — "visit" as in "visual." God had come to "see" them. And nothing could make them feel so naked, so unpresentable, as when they were being looked at by this God, the forgiver. I once heard of a woman who had been terminally ill, that is, until an unforeseen medical breakthrough cured her. A reporter asked her how she felt about her cure. "I didn't realize how sick I was," she said, "until I got better." Only then could she recognize the dreadful truth.

Luke tells of the time Peter the fisherman was down on his luck and Jesus filled his boat with fish, gratis. That was gospel. But what was Peter's response? Did he say, "My, what a lovely catch?" Or, "How can I ever thank you?" No, he said, "Depart from me for I am a sinner." That is what the law had been trying to get him to see, but without success. Only the gospel finally freed him to say that and mean it. Ultimately "'twas grace that taught my heart to fear." I know a man who almost never weeps over his sin. But when he finally does, it is not because he is threatened or rebuked or ridiculed but rather because he is overwhelmed by some astonishing, utterly undeserved act of mercy. Only then can he truly confess, "Depart from me for I am a sinner."

It was out of fear, fear of God, that Peter said that. We know that because of Jesus' reply, "Don't be afraid." Notice what Jesus is not saying. He does not say, "Aw, you're not so bad" or "so who's perfect" or "we all have our faults." Not for a moment does Jesus minimize the sin which Peter is finally confessing. Neither is Jesus saying that Peter's fear is groundless, as if he had never had any reason to be afraid in the first place. No, Jesus lets the gospel bring this sinner to the terror which the law by itself had been unable to consummate. Only then, once Peter recognizes there truly is Someone to be afraid of, does Jesus intervene with his follow-through, "Don't be afraid."

Jesus does do that, too. Having evoked Peter's fear, he then relieves him of it. "'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, 'twas grace my fears relieved." Grace does both. And that happens not just once but over and over. Remember how Luther begins his explanation of each commandment, "We should fear and love God so that" American religiosity would say instead, Make up your mind, either fear or love God, one or the other but not both. Still, God demands both and, with the gospel, provides both — and the one because of the other. The One whom we come to love most is also the One the loss of whose love we most fear. And once given that fear, we can be released from it only by that same One, whose love is potent enough to calm it.

But isn't there still something morbid about that? Suppose it is the divine love that finally frees us to fear God. Even so, why should a loving God want us to be afraid in the first place, even momentarily? Isn't such fear destructive? The fear of God is indeed destructive. It is mortifying. The shepherds were scared almost to death. It was like being crucified. Ah, but that put them in very good company. It joined them to The Baby, the One they found "wrapped" in swaddling cloths and "laid" in a manger. That foreshadowed his death, when once again he would be "wrapped" and "laid," but then in

grave cloths and a sepulchre. "This child." as old Simeon tells The Baby's mother, "is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel."

But why the falling? Answer: to take us down to death with himself, to purge away our old morbid selves. This Christ, precisely because his mercy stares straight through us, can play rough, inspiring mortal fear of himself, cauterizing away our petty phobias. Yet our dying, because it is dying with him, is always for the sake of the rising. At just the right moment in the Godfearers' dread, Jesus breaks in and reverses their dread. With the split-second timing of an exquisite comedian he intervenes with the punchline, "Don't be afraid." Luther explains how every day God reenacts our baptisms, doing the "alien" work of putting to death only to make room for the "proper" work of resurrecting. "Amazing Grace" does both. Come to think of it, America still has some feel for that old hymn. There is hope after all, maybe even for something so Godfearing, so hell-defying as Mary's Magnificat.

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