

# To fear or not to fear?

Colleagues,

To fear or not to fear? That is the question. Good Christmas theology, "Good News gospelly" Christmas theology, is a tad rare these days. Even among Lutherans. Even in THE LUTHERAN, national magazine of our ELCA.

## Example #1

The main theology piece in this year's Christmas issue is "Emmanuel, God is with us!" It wants to show us how to find Good News in the Jesus of today's so-called "Jesus Seminar." It's pretty thin stuff. At key points it's even "worse than that." Listen. Jesus is the great "God-revealer." What he reveals is "what ethical and moral conduct [God] calls forth from me." The "image of Jesus challenges me to think about how I'm following Jesus, how I'm living by his example." What about his cross and resurrection? "So powerful was the [disciples'] experience of Jesus, that even after his death they felt alive and empowered by his Spirit. This Jesus we know was truly a remarkable man."

If today's world is as threatening as other articles in this issue portray it, then that thin gruel is no good news at all. Fact is, it's an "other" Gospel. Yes, that's a sharp verdict. Point is whether it's accurate or not. I've corresponded with the editor on earlier items of thin theology in his journal. He was not convinced. So what else is new—even among Lutherans these days? Small gospels with small joys (or none at all) abound.

With all hell breaking loose everywhere, it is only THE Gospel that is both GOOD enough and NEW enough to be the "GOOD NEWS of great joy" heralded in the first ever publication about Christmas. "Other Gospels" have scads of promotional agents in

today's Areopagos of American culture. They don't need our help. Paul on Mars Hill proposed God's own "other gospel." It was radically "other" than the one(s) all over the place in the Athenian marketplace. We are called to follow in his train.

### **Example #2.**

In the Jan. 2003 number of THE LUTHERAN a major piece urges us "Fear not," and strangely claims 300 New Testament citations for support. That huge number jolted me. I knew it was frightfully (sic!) inflated. So I counted them. I found about 15. There must be some glitch here. But that's actually beside the point.

By contrast my concordance says there are indeed almost 300 texts throughout the Bible that DO commend fear. The Jan. LUTHERAN article ignores them all. In the NT, for example, we hear Jesus chastize the Pharisees for "not fearing God." So which is it? To fear or not to fear? Since both are undeniably Biblical, we can't just choose one (actually the smaller number of texts) and ignore the other (much larger number). But it's not a numbers game, of course.

We need, not a second opinion, but a sequel article.

Actually THE LUTHERAN did indeed do that—exactly 10 years ago. In the Dec. 1992 "Christmas" issue Bob Bertram's "Fear, fear not" article, picking up on the piety of "putting the Babe back into Christmas," made the following pitch: "But putting the baby back means putting the fear of God back into Christmas." Which may well make us twitch. And rightly so.

What Bob does in that article of a decade ago is what Tim Lull commends as the Lutheran key in his "Our Faith" piece on p. 6. of the Jan. 2003 LUTHERAN. I.e., Bob practices the famous Lutheran "proper distinction" as he reads these contradictory texts. The Gospel finally triumphs, but not simply by Bob's ignoring the massive textual evidence for "Yes, fear!" He traces

out how the Manged Messiah engages the reality of that “rightful” fear and finally kills it. But it cost that Messiah plenty. Costly grace indeed.

Bob’s piece is so good, I’ll pass it on for today’s ThTh 237.

In THAT Gospel—Peace & joy!

Ed Schroeder

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***Fear, fear not***  
***by Robert W. Bertram***

*Shortly before his assassination, Martin Luther King Jr. wrote his mother about the next sermon he was planning to preach. He titled 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. Did God not want America to know? But if King and all the preachers in America had preached it, would America have heard it anyway? Maybe America has lost the ability to fear God – not the ability to fear, mind you, but the ability to fear God.*

*If so, the worse for us. And the worse for Christmas.*

*Americans fret much about Christmas. Seldom do our Christmas fears include the One who is truly frightening – the Christmas God. Instead we worry that Christmas has become too pagan, too commercialized or too busy, all of which is true. So we tinker with the celebrations. We even try to “put the Babe back into Christmas.”*

*But putting the baby back means putting the fear of God back*

*into Christmas. What could the Christmas baby possibly have to do with the fear of God?*

*Start with the Christmas shepherds. Luke says "they were filled with fear." \*Fear\* means just that, not awe or reverence. For the next thing the angel told the shepherds is, "Do not be afraid." Surely that did not mean "do not be reverential" or "stop feeling awe."*

*Newer translations say the shepherds "were terrified." And well they might have been. As a lot, shepherds were not exactly saints. Like most of us they had plenty to hide. But suddenly the lights came on. "The glory of the Lord shone around them." Their cover was blown.*

*If the "glory of the Lord" suddenly exposed all the dark corners of our lives, we, too, might fear, as Luke says in Greek, "a mega-fear." We might, if we had the shepherds' rare gift of fearing God.*

### **Someone to fear**

*Or is this a misreading of the Christmas story? The angel promptly told the shepherds not to fear. Doesn't that prove their fear was groundless?*

*No. What better grounds could their fear possibly have had? They feared "the glory of the Lord," not something else, some lesser idol. Otherwise they would not have been told they need fear no longer. That is said only to those who first of all do fear God. Otherwise not.*

*In other places, Luke reports that the Jewish religious authorities feared "the people." The Lord granted them no relief. Similarly Luke writes that the disciples feared the authorities. For that fear they are faulted, not comforted.*

When they are at sea in a storm, they fear drowning. For that Jesus rebukes them. When Jesus stills the storm, they suddenly face someone truly terrifying: "Who is this that even the winds and the sea obey him?" For that fear Jesus offers no rebuke.

Had King lived to preach his sermon he might have told us that we shouldn't fear those who merely kill bodies but the One who "can destroy both body and soul in hell."

"Yes, I tell you, fear him," Jesus adds in Luke's Gospel.

And Luke is supposedly the kindest Gospel. It is the same Luke whose gentle Mary, in her Magnificat, sings that God's "mercy is for those who fear him." God reserves that mercy for her: "The angel said, 'Do not be afraid, Mary.'" He reserves it for her "terrified" old in-law: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah," and for the "terrified" shepherds. They feared God.

In Augsburg, Germany, in 1530, some reform-minded lay Catholics – later called Lutherans – answered the emperor's summons to explain their doctrine. For example, what were they teaching about sin?

Every sinner, they answered, is inherently \*unable, not just unwilling,\* to fear God – not just to trust but to fear God. In describing sin so drastically, they had Scripture on their side, also the best Catholic tradition.

But much shallow spirituality so common today simply dismisses the fear of God as morbid. Is it?

### **Grace and fear**

What is it about God that enables some sinners to fear God? It is God's mercy. That is hardly morbid. True, along with God's mercy there is also a show of might: Jesus stills the tempest; God grants pregnancy to post-menopausal Elizabeth and Mary the

virgin; glory lights up the Judean night for a few shepherds. But that might always serves mercy's purpose.

In each case, God showers some magnificent, unexpected favor upon undeserving sinners. But does God's kindness make beneficiaries afraid of their benefactor? Put it in terms of law and gospel: God's law exposes our life and initiates fear of God. But only the gospel can complete in us true fear and trust of God.

Jesus once terrified mourners at a funeral in Nain (Luke 7:11). He didn't thunder at them for their sin or warn them about hell. He "had compassion," told them not to cry, then raised a dead boy to life. It was then, not before, that "fear seized them all." They realized that God was "visiting his people." God had come to see them. And nothing could make them feel so naked, so unpresentable, as when this gracious God looked at them.

I recall a terminally ill woman who was cured by an unforeseen medical breakthrough. Responding to a reporter who asked how she felt about her cure she said, "I didn't realize how sick I was until I got better."

Luke tells of the time Peter the fisherman was down on his luck. Jesus filled his boat with fish, gratis. That was gospel. Peter's response? He didn't say, "What a lovely catch. How can I thank you?" He said, "Depart from me for I am a sinner."

Only the gospel finally freed Peter to say it and mean it. The law was not enough. As the hymn goes, " 'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear." It is like a man I know who weeps over his sin not because he is threatened or rebuked but because he is overwhelmed by some utterly undeserved act of mercy.

And what did Jesus do? He said, "Don't be afraid." He did not

say, "Peter, you're not so bad" or "So who's perfect? We all have our faults." Not for a moment did he minimize the sin Peter finally confessed. Nor did he say Peter's fear was groundless.

Jesus let the gospel bring him to the terror which the law by itself had been unable to consummate. Only then, once Peter recognized there truly was Someone to be afraid of, did Jesus intervene: "Don't be afraid."

### **God's proper work**

" 'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, 'twas grace my fears relieved." Grace does both. That happens not just once but over and over.

God demands both fear and love, and with the gospel, provides both. The One we come to love most is also the One whose love we most fear losing. Only God's love is potent enough to release us from that fear.

To some this may still seem morbid. Why should a loving God want us to be afraid in the first place, even momentarily? Isn't this fear destructive? Yes, it is mortifying. "This child" whose birth we now celebrate "is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel," old Simeon tells us.

Falling? Yes, 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, burning away our petty phobias.

Every day God re-enacts our baptism, doing the *\*alien work\** of putting us to death only to make room for the *\*proper work\** of resurrecting us. *\*Amazing Grace\** does both.

Our dying is dying with him, and it is always for the sake of

*rising. At just the right moment, Jesus breaks in and reverses our dread. With split-second timing he intervenes, "Don't be afraid."*

*—from The Lutheran, December 1992*