

# CROSSINGS

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is for panic

*In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the LORD stood before them, and the glory of the LORD shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see-- I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"*

What's with the Halloween element of the Holy Night?

I mean, if the angels meant well . . . if they wanted those shepherds to be *at peace*, why frighten them in the first place? Why scare them out of their wits and *then* say "Oh, please you don't need to be afraid?" Why jerk them around like that? You could give somebody a heart attack.

Put yourself in their place. Do you like being startled? Don't you prefer calm? Wouldn't you be willing to settle for having baby Jesus quietly insinuate peace and love into your heart at Christmas time, maybe through a means like a gentle snow coming down from on high?

We say "Merry Christmas," right? Not "Scary/Merry Christmas"?

But to get the good out of Christmas, we must do a two-step: 1) Be afraid. 2) Be not afraid.

I think too little attention is given these days to what a terrifying event we celebrate at Christmas. Heck, no one is even afraid of Santa Claus any more. The idea of Saint Nicholas used to send a chill up children's spine. "You'd better watch out!" we cheerfully sing; "Santa Claus is coming to town." But no one watches out any more. No one is really afraid they are going to get a lump of coal in their stocking. Kids pull Santa's beard with impunity. Santa no longer has two lists: "naughty" and "nice"; just the one list: "kids." Everyone's name is on it. A lot of naughty children make out like bandits at Christmas.



Artist: Robert Werberig

So, Santa isn't scary any more. But (more seriously for Christians) it seems the frightening side of the birth of Christ has also disappeared. We have domesticated Christmas. "Peace to those whom God favors"—(Yikes! Am I on that list?)—has been mistranslated into "Peace to all." "Joy to everyone."

Why should that be a problem? Why shouldn't Christmas be *entirely* about generosity and kindness, sweetness, giving, visions of sugarplums, family, serenity and cuteness? Does it *really* have to be partly about fear?

I'll tell you why *I* worry about losing the scary side of Christmas: We need the scary part to be true so the good news can be truly good news.

Luke tells us the shepherds were terrified. Terror struck their hearts. And that dread of theirs was the *essential* background to the angel's message of

joy and peace. “Fear not!” means nothing to people who aren’t afraid in the first place. Only those who are petrified by the glory are able to experience the peace the angels announce. Otherwise, the angels would have dressed in plain clothes, walked up at noon, and suggested the shepherds check out this new baby who had potential.

Think about the story. The *shepherds* were afraid. Scaredy-cats need not apply to work as shepherds, because shepherds must stand and fight for the flock. Shepherds are tough guys who carry big sticks. Yet those tough guys saw something that terrorized *them*: an angel surrounded by the glory of the Lord.

What’s scary about angels? Monsters frighten us, not angels!

But those tough guys were frightened by a brightly shining individual who appeared before them to tell them something—because “the glory of the *LORD* shone around them.”

The glory of the *LORD*—manifest in bright light, or fire—had scared people way back to the time of the exodus. The glory of the *LORD* shining from the face of Moses scared people almost as much as the glory shining from the mountain. The glory of the Lord was the representation to the people of *GOD HIMSELF*!

Why would that scare anyone? Now we are close to the root of the mystery. We don’t want God close because we are not friends. We’ve been running around with other gods. We have not been pure. We have not been faithful. We have been bored with God, or angry with God. A police check we might survive; a God check we will not. We could not handle a thorough inquiry into our keeping of one commandment, much less ten. “You shall have no other gods before me.” Like, are you kidding? Therefore, we have been avoiding God.

Now God appears—when we are least ready. We are asleep. We smell like sheep. It’s the middle of the week. And the glory of God shines around us!

I’ll tell you why we’re scared. We are thinking, “The jig is up!”

If we want to experience the “great joy” of Christmas in our hearts this night and not just some precious moments to post on Facebook, we have to recognize the true terror of Christmas: “God is here and time is up!” We need to empty our hearts of the pretense that we are satisfactory

children of God based on our own achievements, our habits, our resume, our ancestry, or our excuses.

Panicking, we might just recognize the value in what the angel says. It is not what we expect. On the contrary, the angel says: “Do *not* be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people. To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

If the biggest thing we are afraid of is the opinion of other people, we don’t need Jesus. If the biggest thing we are afraid of is sickness, we don’t need

Jesus. If the biggest thing we are afraid of is financial ruin, we don’t need Jesus. If the worst thing we can imagine is losing our friends or our mind, we don’t need Jesus. If our greatest fear is war, earthquake, famine, we don’t need Jesus.

Strike that: If the biggest thing we are afraid of is the opinion of other people, sickness, financial ruin, losing our friends or our mind, war, earthquake, famine, terrorism, Jesus is *precisely* what we need.

But first we need to be more afraid of God than we are of those other things. Then we should look again, listen again, and think again, because it’s *Christmas*! The God before whom we tremble

reaches down to us with a beautiful and decisive Word, a gift and promise of forgiveness and peace. Trembling before God, we are ready for a little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay who is not crying yet but will before he dies. For Christ comes to earth with a salvation in his hands that is not merely a series of reprieves from worries.

“Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad, let the sea thunder and all that is in it; let the field be joyful and all that is therein.” For Christ is born, who will “redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.”

Once we feared the midnight darkness. Once we feared wolves and bears. Once upon a time sheep feared their shepherds even! For they were hirelings.

But now we have seen a great light. Not the light of the glory of the Lord which strikes fear into mortal hearts, but the light of the grace of God which substitutes peace for fear.

Celebrate the whole of Christmas at the midnight hour. “Fear! . . . Fear not!” Light . . . in the midst



Woodcut by Werner Juza

of the darkness. Peace . . . where strife predominates. Forgiveness . . . where sin controls. Faith and hope and love . . . where before were only cheap facsimiles.

“For see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah. The Lord.”

*So. May you enjoy a Full Christmas!*

*And I hope you will give yourself (or someone else) a registration for the January conference of Crossings. Notice the impressive list of speakers who will be presenting on the back side of this page. Check the website for the schedule, registration and other details of the conference: <http://www.crossings.org/conference>.*

*“Law, Gospel and the Holy Spirit: Discerning the Spirit in the Double Life of the Christian.” I don’t know precisely where the conference planners are headed with this, but I am confident you will be enriched by the gifts of those who are planning to share with us. As ever, Crossings is seeking to accentuate the role of the law/gospel dialectic in any theological understanding or proclamation.*

*Note that tuition is FREE for all seminarians and 50% off for all newcomers. All the more reason to come.*

*We thank you for your support of Crossings in the past. Your contributions continue to be vital to keeping our work going. Please consider renewing that support with a “Christmas gift” in the enclosed envelope.*

*Marcus Felde*

### **From the Executive Director - Steve Kuhl**

As we work our way through Advent and into the celebration of Christmas, the big thing on the Crossings Community calendar is the upcoming 6th International Crossings Conference. I look forward to seeing many of you there. But Crossings gatherings can take on many forms, and they need not be as formal as a conference. One example is the Crossings Text Study Group that has been meeting every Wednesday in Milwaukee. Here is how it got started.

In June of this year, I sent out an announcement (which I continue to do each week) over the synod

list serve, to former and present students, and to friends and other acquaintances, inviting them to join in Crossings Text Study Group Martin Luther Lutheran Church on the western rim of Milwaukee. Space did not allow me to publish the announcement here. But I’ll send it to you upon request. Email me at [skuhl1@wi.rr.com](mailto:skuhl1@wi.rr.com).

The response has been wonderful. Overall, twenty-two people are participating in the Group. Of course, not everyone comes every week. We



*A small portion of the Crossings Text Study Group paused for this picture. You'll see five of them at the January Conference. From the left: Steve Kuhl, Margaret Madsen, John Weiss, Nanette Smith, Susan Weiss, Arlene Watson.*

usually have ten to twelve people at any given session. But that has been part of the beauty of it being a lectionary “text” study group. People can come in and out as they are able. Above are a few of the group members posing for a picture after one of the studies...

Finally, dear readers, I do have a thought to plant into your minds. Consider starting a Crossings Text Study Group in your congregation. A Crossings Text Study Group need not be an extra event you do. It can easily be a regular part of your congregation’s already existing rhythm of educational ministry. And if you would like help in learning how to use the Crossing Method better, come to the January Preconference where veteran Crossings leaders Steve Albertin and Chris Repp will teach and practice the method with you. I, too, will be happy to talk with you and share my experience of leading Crossings Text Study. Just tap me on the shoulder and ask.

*Steve*



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