

Fear Not!

One night, some time ago, I had already gone to bed, and I realized that I needed a drink of water. Well, if you don't just get up and get it, you end up waking up 10 times, and thinking 'I'm thirsty'. So I gave in. I went downstairs to the kitchen. And when I went for a glass, I noticed that there were a bunch of dirty dishes in the sink.

So I thought, I'll just put these in the dishwasher, for tomorrow. But, of course, the dishwasher was full of clean things. And I thought, "Well then, I'll put them away". So I did, and I began loading the dirty ones. And I realized that there were more than I had thought, so I figured, "I'll just run a load tonight". So I was looking around for anything else that might need to go in -- did a check for glasses in the living room (not that either Dianna or I would ever leave a dirty glass sitting around or anything!) . . . and I put the coffee pot in it's place, and pulled out the gold filter in our coffee maker, saw that it had coffee in it, and dumped it in the trash.

Well, it made the wrong sound, and half of it went on the floor, (it went 'hiss', instead of 'clump') which is when it occurred to me that those grounds were dry, and Dianna had set the pot up for the next morning. So I had to refill it, but of course, our coffee container was empty, so I had to find a new can in the cabinet, and open it . . . all I wanted was a crummy glass of water. But things got out of hand.

Christmas can be like that -- four weeks or so of one thing leading to another, and to another . . . and before we know it, we're about to go off the scale on our stress - o - meter.

I would hazard a guess that there are some here tonight -- maybe quite a few of you -- for whom these moments here are the first quiet, still, moments you've had in days -- maybe weeks. And you may well be so caught up in the frenzy that it's even hard for you to be sitting still here right now! Your mind is racing, you're thinking of the things you have yet to do tonight, you're thinking of the people coming over tomorrow...

And...there are some sitting here tonight who are in the midst of raging storms in your lives...without exaggeration, your whole world seems to be rocking back and forth. You're thinking about some decisions that need to be made -- and you feel that you are running out of options. Or, you can't help but think about some troubles that will still be with you when you get home tonight, and after

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Christmas is ended. Hardly anyone has had a ‘good year’ financially, but for some of you, you are truly at the end of your rope. Unemployed, underemployed, bills are piling up, and you are *scared*.

There are people here tonight who are carrying burdens that are so heavy that you think no one can really understand what you’re feeling...there are cares and concerns for yourselves, for friends, or family members. . . it seems that tonight is anything but *quiet*. Anything but peaceful. And any quiet is a tense quiet.

I know that you are scared. See, folks this is the real world. I guess that we could take an hour here tonight and close our eyes, and pretend that all is well, that these issues don’t exist. We could focus simply on the ‘story’ and the songs; on the decorations, and all that, and try to create some kind of spiritual ‘oasis’; but that’s not really the context of our gathering tonight – and more importantly, its not the context of the original story. Jesus didn’t come into a perfect, make believe, Pollyanna world.

He came into a world of hurting, broken people. He came among those same rebellious, messed up creations... and he came out of love and compassion. He came to this earth to *rescue* us. Not the ‘*ideal*’ us, but the ‘*real*’ us. The people who don’t want to admit it, but who are starting to doubt whether God really knows what you’re feeling; he came for you... the people who are questioning this whole ‘faith’ thing, because when it comes to finding a job, or paying the mortgage, or getting good results at that doctor’s appointment, or fixing the relationship with the children, or spouse,... or, whatever... well, its not ‘working’ and you’re *scared*. He came for you, too.

The Bible says in the Gospel of John that ‘no one has ever seen God’. And the reason for that is that in our brokenness, in our rebellion and limited state as human beings we’re not *capable* of seeing God. The closest anyone ever came, perhaps, is found in the Old Testament, where we read of Moses going up Mt. Sinai to receive the Law from the hand of God. We don’t know *what* he saw up there, but we do know that the very mountain itself was cordoned off, all the way around; so no one, not even an animal could touch the base of that mountain on pain of death.

It was *holy* because of the presence of God. It was a fearful place.

And when Moses returned, the people couldn’t bear to even look at *him*, having been in the presence of God. The people asked him to put a veil over his face. He scared them with just *reflected* glory.

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That is something that we see over and over in the Bible. Even the Messengers from God who come bearing Good News are initially met with fear. The angel comes to Zechariah, tells him about the coming birth of his son, who would be John the Baptizer, preparing the way for the Messiah. The angel's first words were: *"Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard."*

Same thing with Mary: before the message was delivered, the angel began with this statement - *"Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God."*

The Shepherds out on the hillside, same thing...

But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people."

In Revelation 1: 17, the exalted Jesus appears before John, who is now an old man, one who has been following Christ for his whole life. He is familiar with the 'things of God'. John's response, in his own words: *"When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. The beginning and the end..."*

It's an interesting thing to note that whenever people came close to God in Scripture, their initial reaction is always fear. Even with Jesus – who is God made flesh. John, in the beginning of his Gospel says, *"No one has ever seen God, but the one and only [Son], who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known."*

But when Jesus began to reveal himself as more than mere man, as God – through miracles of healing, through calming the storms, in raising the dead to life – again the response was typically *fear*. Peter says, "Go away from me, Lord, I am a sinful man" recognizing that awesome gap between humanity and holiness.

Interestingly, Jesus agrees – even endorses – that response. In Luke 12 Jesus says to the disciples: *"I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after your body has been killed, has authority to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him."*

Fear here means a sense of awe and wonder, a deep respect... but it also means to recognize that there is a gulf between us and God, between the finite and the eternal, between sinfulness and holiness.

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See, this is the context of the first Christmas story is that God came to people who were broken, wandering aimlessly through this life, to people with deep hurts, scars, fears, troubles... he came among those who don't realize that that these temporary things are not even the biggest issue in our lives. The biggest issue (and, in fact, the reason why all these other things take on such gigantic proportions to us) is our estrangement from God.

And God came to fix *all of that*. God came into the midst of this world, came in humility, came giving up his rights, his power, his Glory, his rule – and came out of love. He came to close that gap of estrangement, he came to give us *life* – to show us what we are doing here, to give us a context for all our human problems and challenges, to buy our freedom and to walk with us in this life and into the next. And so the first message of the angels was always: Fear Not! Don't be afraid.

In the New Testament book of Hebrews we read about the contrast between the unveiled God of the Old Testament with the 'Word made flesh' revealed in Jesus Christ. (Understand, this is not a different God, it is not contradictory – what is being described here is the *reason* why the New Covenant was necessary, and how blessed we are to be on 'this side' of Christmas ... (Hebrews 12)

¹⁸ *You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm;* ¹⁹ *to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them,* ²⁰ *because they could not bear what was commanded: "If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death."* ²¹ *The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, "I am trembling with fear."*

²² *But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly,* ²³ *to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,* ²⁴ *to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant...*

In Christ, we find the truth of a God that we do not need to run away from... but one who will walk with us in this life and the next.

A author named Richard Eyre was writing about a time when he was in college, and worked a summer job in Honolulu. One weekend he made his way to the big island of Hawaii, and was trying to hitchhike from Kona, on the west coast, to Hilo, on the east. It was nearly a full day's journey then, and he assumed he'd need several different rides to make it.

Fear Not!

His words:

“The first car that stopped for me was a beat -up, chugging old vehicle containing a wonderful native Hawaiian couple who introduced themselves as Rusty and Honey. “Where you go?” they inquired in pidgin English.

‘I’m headed for Hilo,” I responded.

All day long they drove me through the interior of the island, stopping frequently to show me a waterfall or a particularly beautiful bit of jungle. They took delight in my interest. They were like children sharing their toys. Their spontaneity and joy were contagious, and I found myself having a wonderful time.

As the sun set behind us, we pulled into Hilo and I thanked them for a great day, adding that I surely felt lucky that the first car that stopped for me was going all the way to Hilo.

“Oh, we weren’t going to Hilo,” Rusty said.

“What? -- where were you going?”

“To the grocery store,” said Honey, matter - of - factly.

I guess the confused look on my face was a question, and Rusty answered it with words that I’ll never forget: “*We can go to grocery store tomorrow, but can’t drive you to Hilo tomorrow.*”¹

Over and over in the Scripture we receive assurances that there is a God who not only understands what we’re going through here on this earth... but who has redeemed our pain. We read constant assurance of a God who knows us, who loves us with an unending love. We read of a God whose very presence makes the ‘things of this earth grow dim.’ And a God who has the time... and the desire... to walk with us, to show us his good gifts that are beyond price, who has promised to love us and care for us always. Forever. Forever...

That’s what we are celebrating here tonight. This truth that will be just as ‘true’ next week. Next year. And always... The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

I want to close by reading some of God’s promises to you...

Isaiah 41:10

So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God.

¹Don’t just Do Something, Sit There, by Richard Eyre, p. 30 -31

Fear Not!

I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

Psalm 46: 1 - 2

God is our refuge and strength,
an ever-present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,

Philippians 4: 6 - 7

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Romans 8: 37 – 38

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Psalm 121: 1 – 2

I lift up my eyes to the hills –
From where will my help come?
My help comes from the Lord,
Who made heaven and earth.

Amen!