

One of the scariest things we can do is name our fears. I'll start. Today, I'm afraid that we have put so much work into our Christmas celebrations, and everything will fall on its face. Everything's going to go wrong. My parents, her parents, and my wife's gonna hate their gifts and not going to tell me about it. I'm afraid that I'm going to get towels from Bed Bath and Beyond for Christmas. In the grander scheme of things, I'm afraid of being irrelevant, of thinking that I'm not making a difference or being effective. I'm afraid of living a life that will be forgotten or meaningless, one where I've focused more on procedure than substance. I'm frightened over the course of our world, where many care more about self-righteousness and opinions than their neighbor. At the same time, my gift is as an eternal optimist. I hope I can become the best pastor and caregiver with the gifts that God has provided for me. I can offer the world what I can and do my best to be a conduit of God's transforming powers. We all have fears and hopes, but they often become about me: personalized, separating, preventing us from being with another. My hopes and fears can drive me away from loving and serving you the best I can, and that is a problem.

I love the hymn "O Little Town of Bethlehem." The first verse crafts a vivid image of the ancient Bethlehem: quiet, serene, and waiting. I always imagined a city asleep, without anyone in the streets. On the one hand, what special thing could happen in this backwater village. Would you really expect an answer for all prayers to come in the middle of nowhere? But we hear about a village almost holding its breath. The silent stars go by. Dark streets and everlasting light. Then there's the summation, the line that consistently sticks with me: "The Hopes and Fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."

"The Hopes and Fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." This phrase that strikes at the heart of humanity. In this village is the epicenter of all the hopes and fears we

carry on our hearts, all the things that make us react in healthy and unhealthy ways, to cry with joy, to shout with hatred, to laugh, to cry, to seek, to hide, every bit of the very stuff that makes us human beings. It's all the gold and all the crud. This is where all begins and ends. This is where all the hopes and fears of all the years meet and become what they are meant to be. Come, welcome this miracle with me and find where our hopes and fears lie.

I have a lot of hopes and fears. They will always be with me. To be human is to hope and to fear. God never supplies us with the happiness of rainbows at all times nor takes away the pains of living this life magically. The song doesn't say that the "Hopes and fears of all the years are dispelled in thee tonight" or "are dismissed in thee." We were created to have both hope and fear, for they serve a purpose. Fear tells you when you're entering a dangerous situation and need to leave. Hope gives you strength to seek better in the world and grow in faith. We cannot have one without the other; we need both. But they often become selfish, only about what I want and fear. Our hopes become our personal hiding place of what I want, and fears easily become a wedge driving us apart from one another. Fear focuses on all things separating us and becomes a separation.

But God has a plan. God always has a plan. And God's grand plan, God's response to all the misuse of our fears and hopes, the focus of our faith, the answer is...a baby. Wait, a baby? This is how God responds to all the burdens and cares of my heart, all the burdens, hopes, and cares of human history? A baby? How's that going to help me? Will the baby prep the ham and the meal? Will the baby make sure I don't get the gift of towels?

No, the stakes are much higher than that, but yes, the response of God to humanity's hopes and fears is a child. A little helpless child. He cannot even lift his head, but he is the gift of the Almighty God, creator of all? It sounds like an insufficient offering for such grand

struggles of human history. This seems to solve nothing. But this is God's response to all those things God knows that we carry throughout time; this gift provides the lesson.

Indeed, through this birth, all the hopes and fears of the previous years and the years to come are provided with an answer in this little child. Fears had been separating; fear made us fear each other, but this is a new thing. God came to be with us as a human being, as one of us, and God wants to know these struggles and hopes we face firsthand. We name him Immanuel, for God is with us. God seeks to be with us...all of us. No exceptions.

So, the first response of the angels celebrating was to invite everyone and their hopes and fears. Invite all the peoples, starting with the most unwanted. You'll never meet a more motley crew than those who gathered around that manger. From our perspective, they were the range of the CEOs to the ones working in sewage treatment. You can see it in every nativity scene, although they've become so commonplace we've lost the gravity. Through that simple fact, that gift that seemed so insignificant and powerless provided the greatest power. What is that power? The reality, the truth that through him, we are more powerful as one body, and we share those hopes and fears. We can put them on the table and realize that we share these things that can separate when we are working together as one body, united in Christ's mission. They were not people of different social structure; they recognized their oneness as people of God surrounding the Christ child. We all have hopes and fears, and yours are often like mine. Through the power of Christ that binds us, we can control our fears and the fears of the world as one people by sharing them. We are more powerful together than apart. Even still, all are invited beside the manger: the shepherds, the cattle, the sheep, the lambs, the kings, the peasants, the loved, the unloved, the fully abled and the other abled, the aged, the young, every race, every belief, Democrats,

Republicans, Libertarians, the affiliated, the nonaffiliated, the angels, the lowly, those who fasten the button then zip their pants, those who zip then fasten the button on their pants, the Bears fans, the Packers fans, the East Coasters, the West Coasters, the native, the foreigner, the Blue Collar, the White Collar, the rich, the poor, the confident, the awkward, the angry, those at peace to bow down at the manger...AND BE CHANGED by the experience, for all fears and hopes are exposed in the face of the baby. We become family.

It's wonderfully mysterious because those we are supposed to hate are kneeling right beside us to look in at this miracle. We see the Baby Jesus, and this gift brings us to understand that we are changed by the incarnate God on earth to set aside distinctions as things that we choose to separate us and recognize our oneness. Distinctions don't disappear; God made us different for a reason, but distinctions as barriers disappear. These barriers are torn down and it is exposed who we really are: people created in the image of God, with all those things we bring with us. We are one great family. The hopes and fears of all the years are met in Bethlehem by all those people and handled by the baby. These are put in their place by the coming of Jesus Christ: born as God, grown into a man, who takes away the sins of the world and reminds us of a simple fact: we are one in His name and His mission. We have similar fears and hopes. We can invest in our hopes and better keep our fears when we are one, as the Body of Christ, as Christ's great family.

This is Christmas. We gather together as family. Through Christ's coming, we become a greater family, one of the Body of Christ, where we share our fears and hopes. No doubt, our simple fears will happen. Our Christmas celebrations may fall on our face. I may yet get towels for Christmas. But those are not important in the grand scheme of things. Around the world, our fear will lead us to be more invested in self-righteousness more than

care for the neighbor. But with Christ, there is peace. The coming of Jesus Christ brings together the Hopes and Fears of all the years into the form of the tiniest child, the Baby Jesus, who gives us new direction. The wedges of fear are gone. The personal hopes become communal. We are brought together, never driven apart. With Christ, we learn the mission in which to put them in their place because we are not separated by fears and hopes; we become not just me and you and you and you, but US together with hopes and fears we all carry and we will attend to together. All this is through the miracle of the child. It is in Christ the Lord, who, guiding us to focus the hopes and fears of ourselves and the world, brings about life for us always. Let us sing as one people then go forth this Christmas renewed, in wonder, bewildered, and amazed by this incredible happening, then, now, and to come. Amen and Amen!