

## Do Not Be afraid!

It is important to remember that the first thing the angel said when appearing to the shepherds was, "Do not be afraid". The angel said it to Mary when telling her she would have God's son, and so did the dream message Joseph received telling him God wanted him to take Mary as his wife. The world is in desperate need of this Christmas message just now! Fear is something people are all too familiar with. It is useful when it pushes us to seek shelter in a storm or run from a fire, but human beings have the unfortunate tendency to turn fear into anger and use it as a weapon for personal gain, for power, and to control others. Instilling fear has been used to bring about some of the worst atrocities in human history. Dictators, conquerors, and some political leaders used fear to subjugate and 'control' people to gain or stay in power. Fear is a primary tool of all abusers, and bullies. Even some religious leaders/groups use fear to try to force people to behave in their prescribed way. Some early American hellfire and damnation preaching relied on fear to 'win' converts (a form of force in religion which Anabaptists reject). Some religious leaders have gone so far as to use abuse and torture to reinforce fear. (The treatment of Native American children in some 'Christian' boarding schools, for example, or on an even bigger scale, the horrors of the Spanish inquisition (1478-1834)).

The use of fear in this way, is to miss the central core of the message Jesus came to bring. God sent Jesus because he loved us! He repeatedly calls us not to be afraid. Jesus calls us to follow him not because we fear punishment, but because his love for us is so great, that it awakens in us love for him, for our fellow human beings, and for all his creation; a love we cannot help but share. We are called to be thankful and joyful people not vengeful critics. We are not called to make everyone see things the way we do. We are called to walk in another's shoes as we strive for understanding, so we can work together to see things as God does and so fulfill God's will (read the parables, the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7)). Fearful people do not see options and are less likely to think outside the box. They are more likely to look for enemies and assume conspiracies are everywhere. Love looks for the good in people, is open to working together, and seeks the welfare of everyone not just self-interest.

As we move into a new year, let us not forget to hold up the message the angels shared on that first Christmas – "do not be afraid!" It was love, not fear that God sent to us in that Bethlehem manger. Love, not fear is in the message Jesus taught and demonstrated in his actions (see Luke 10:27, Matthew 5:43-48, etc.). The characteristics of love are clearly expressed in I Corinthians 13.

Spend this year looking for the good in people. Find every opportunity to be kind, share joy, and live in hope not fear. Do not forget, "Love Came Down at Christmas" (p208 Brethren Hymnal A worship Book). Give thanks for the gift and remember, love is enormously powerful, but only if it is shared!

- **The people of Argentina** – wild fires are burning thousands of acres of land
- **The people of Brazil** – unusually heavy rain caused flooding with several dam failures
- **Those dealing with COVID.** Ohio is hard hit. The National guard is helping in hospitals. Case numbers are growing worldwide. The U.S. is still the worst hit. Some U.S. locations report a 5-fold increase in children hospitalized with COVID (Omicron). Unvaccinated or under vaccinated children (like adults) are the majority. Holiday gatherings; not masking & improper masking are factors. 1,035 children under 17, have died of COVID.
- **Afghanistan.** People are dying from starvation & preventable disease because of inept leadership, & limited resources (the country depended on international aid for some 80% of its budget). Their assets are frozen, & international aid has stopped. This week, the UN made some provision to restart humanitarian aid that will reach the people in need.
- **Remember South Africa.** Desmond Tutu died December 26. He was the moral conscience of the nation. He was an Anglican bishop, theologian, anti-apartheid & human rights activist. He won the 1985 Nobel Peace Prize. Nelson Mandela (1<sup>st</sup> Black President) appointed him to head the Truth & Reconciliation Commission which investigated past human rights abuses by all sides. Tutu's efforts helped bring about the end of Apartheid.



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