

Are You Afraid Of The Light?

Luke 2:8-15

Trey Davis

Ridge Road Baptist Church, Raleigh

December 19, 2021

It is a scene so common that it has become a stereotype. A prisoner or a soldier is stealthily making his way across a dark yard, trying to escape his captors or to infiltrate the enemy fortress. He's dressed in dark clothes, trying to move quietly and to remain undetected under the cover of the night. Suddenly, floodlights switch on with a loud clang, and the protagonist is caught—frozen, paralyzed—in bright beams that turn the nighttime to day.

Another scene: a spy has been captured and awaits interrogation. He sits shackled to a chair in a dingy, cramped cell. A detective walks in and flips on a light that hangs from the ceiling, then pulls the cord and aims it right in the spy's face, causing him to recoil and squint at the luminous attack. The light assaults his senses, making him squirm in his chair, almost as if he were in physical pain.

The past few weeks, we have reflected on the use of light in our Advent and Christmas passages—the idea that light is sacred and connected to our sense of preparation, hope, peace, and joy. The truth is that light doesn't always have this calming and uplifting effect on us. Sometimes light overwhelms and terrifies us, paralyzes us, assaults us.

Is the same true for our encounters with God, particularly with our encounters with God at Christmas? And if it is...why? Why would God terrify us at Christmas?

* * *

Well, the answer to the first question seems to be a pretty clear and decided yes: God does terrify us. This is true even at Christmas, although its roots go back much further. The characters in the books of Genesis and Exodus are constantly fearful when God approaches, from Adam & Eve all the way to Moses—Moses, in his first divine encounter, shields his face from the burning bush, “afraid to look at God.”¹ The early chapters of Matthew and Luke are likewise filled with stories where angels appear—to Joseph, to Mary, to Zechariah, to the shepherds in today's scripture—and with nearly each instance, the angel shows up and immediately says “do not be terrified” with little success. When God or the angels appear in the Bible, people get scared; angels appear a lot in the nativity story.

To understand why God would want to inflict such horror on us during the joy and hope of Advent, it's worth looking at why these characters are terrified, and specifically at why the shepherds in today's story are afraid.

Our first instinct, I think, is to assume that the angel has caught the shepherds by surprise. They're out in the field in the middle of a silent night, watching over sheep who—no offense to the ovine—are not exactly the most exciting animals in the world to look at. In my head, this is a calm and even a boring evening. Then the angel comes out of nowhere, appearing suddenly and shattering the dullness. The scripture does not say that an angel approached them from a distance but rather that the angel abruptly “stood before them.” The verse connotes a

¹ Exodus 3:6

commanding presence, a sense that something or someone dominant rose up out of the darkness and made his presence known quickly and powerfully. Surprise is a natural reaction here, and sometimes surprise also includes a moment of terror.

The problem with this reading is that the Bible doesn't use the word "surprised" or "startled"—it uses words we translate as "terrified" and "afraid." If the author of Luke wanted to suggest that the angels surprised the shepherds, surprised them so much that it sent them spinning into a place of terror, then he had the words available to do that...and he chose not to. This does not seem to be a story about simply being startled. These shepherds are experiencing a much deeper kind of fear.

We know this not only because of the lack of the word "surprise" but also because of the words that the author does use, the words we translate as "terrified." The actual Greek here is "they feared with great fear."² The word used for fear has the same root in each usage—the author is doubling down on his description of the shepherds as afraid, trying to impress upon us the extreme intensity of the distress that they were feeling in that moment.

The word is "φοβον (phobon)," the same word that we get "phobia" from. In the biblical Greek, the word "phobon" suggests a particular kind of fear, the kind of fear that includes some element of reverence.³ Again, there is a whole other word available to the author that means something closer to "panic;" the word in our scripture (twice!) suggests people who are astonished at the overwhelming magnitude of the deific presence in front of them. The shepherds are not primarily startled or panicked. They are awestruck—and, to be clear, terrified by that awe—at the godly messenger in front of them.

This is, at least, a little bit of the answer as to why God terrifies us at Christmas: because, if we give unto God an appropriate reverence, we typically end up at least a little bit scared. Fear and reverence complement each other. The line between the two is so thin that it is nearly impossible to do Christmas right without at least a little smidgen of fear creeping in.

Of course...these shepherds experience way more than a smidgen of fear. They are terrified, "fearing with great fear." Just as the author of Luke could have chosen a different word to convey that the shepherds were startled, he also could have chosen a different word to convey that they were mostly reverent and not all that fearful, and that's not the word he chose. He chose a word that put the emphasis on the fear (again, twice!). He chose a word that the angel himself will push back on, saying "fear not" with the same Greek "phobon" in the very next verse. Surely the angel isn't saying "be not reverent" but rather "be not afraid."

So, I would argue, the shepherds are certainly reverent, but that's not the only thing stoking their fear on this night. They are afraid, terrified, "fearing with great fear" for some other reason.

My first thought was that they are fearful of death. The appearance of an angel often suggests that the angel's return trip to heaven may not be a solitary one. This is the role of the angel in Robert Altman's final film, 2006's *A Prairie Home Companion* based on the Garrison Keillor radio show. Every time the angel character appears on the screen, the other characters wonder if she is coming to end one of their lives...and, more precisely, wonder which one of them she is

² <https://biblehub.com/interlinear/luke/2-9.htm>

³ Nagy, Gregory. "The Subjectivity of Fear as Reflected in Ancient Greek Wording," *The Center for Hellenic Studies*, last modified March 3, 2021, accessed December 17, 2021, <https://chs.harvard.edu/curated-article/gregory-nagy-the-subjectivity-of-fear-as-reflected-in-ancient-greek-wording/>.

coming for. It is a common trope, found in short stories, musicals, movies, and pretty much every facet of our cultural literary experience...including our scripture. This is the reaction that Gideon has when he encounters an angel under an oak tree—he immediately assumes that he will die having come face to face with the angel. As part of the Hebrew Scriptures, Gideon is a story that the shepherds would have known.

The shepherds would also have known that it was the “Angel of Death” that passed over Egypt and wiped out the first-born of the non-Israelite families. They would be familiar with similar stories about angels attacking Jerusalem in 2 Samuel,⁴ defending David’s army in 1 Chronicles,⁵ or defeating Assyrians in 2 Kings.⁶ The appearance of an angel frequently connotes death, death being worthy of our fear *and* our reverence, and perhaps this is what the shepherds are thinking when the sky lights up with the heavenly host. Of course, this is not why the angels have come, and so it also makes sense that they would calm the shepherds with a “do not fear,” as in, “do not fear—I’m not here to whisk you away to heaven.”

That is a perfectly legitimate reading, and I could end the sermon here and send everyone home early. But, even if it’s a legitimate reading, I don’t think it’s a complete one. I think that something else is going on here, that there is another source of the shepherds’ fear.

The shepherds would have been familiar not only with the stories of angels wiping out entire cities and armies but also with the stories where angels materialize to individuals or families. These shepherds would have known about the three strangers who appeared to Abraham, and while Abraham bowed down before them, he did not think that his life was ending. Instead, he welcomed them in, fed them, and showed them hospitality.⁷

Similarly, when Jacob wrestled with a man in the middle of the desert⁸ or when the prophet Balaam meets an angel on the road,⁹ these men do not worry for their lives. They are indeed reverent and respectful, but they are not terrified, not “fearing with great fear” that they are about to shuffle off this mortal coil.

When an angel appears unexpectedly to an individual or family in the Old Testament, it is typically not to escort them to heaven. Even Gideon, who fears for his life, survives his angelic encounter. If the shepherds were as familiar with Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and Gideon as they were with the stories where angels eliminate armies, then while they may have been startled and may have been fearful of death, those emotions would not have been the only thing they were feeling that night.

Abraham meets with these angels in Genesis, offers them hospitality, and they offer to him the blessing of a son. This is the story where Sarah overhears the angels’ promise and laughs in disbelief because she is so old. But, of course, Abraham and Sarah eventually get their son, establishing a line of patriarchs that will eventually lead to the nation of Israel.

⁴ 2 Samuel 24:15-16

⁵ 1 Chronicles 21:15

⁶ 2 Kings 19:35

⁷ Genesis 18:2-7

⁸ Genesis 32

⁹ Numbers 22:22-38

Jacob wrestles with God in the desert before returning home to Esau. He enters the night alone, already afraid. God appears in the form of a stranger, the two tussle, and Jacob is injured in the process. At the end of the encounter, Jacob's name changes to Israel, and he too takes his place in the long line of patriarchs who will establish God's people.

When Moses approaches the burning bush, he receives orders to lead God's people out of Egypt, a command that he attempts to refuse before reluctantly accepting. The afternoon on the mountainside—tending a flock of sheep, which seems relevant as we read today's scripture—sets him on a path that will consume the rest of his life, first confronting Pharaoh, then rallying the Israelite slaves, and then delivering them almost the whole way to the Promised Land.

And Gideon is also minding his own business, threshing wheat, when he encounters an angel who instructs him to take on the Midianites, again setting the future of the nation of Israel on the shoulders of an average man. Gideon would go on to become what is widely considered the greatest judge of Israel.

When they appeared to these men in the Hebrew scriptures, the angels did not come to end their lives. The angels came to change their lives, to transform them drastically into something practically unrecognizable. When an old man becomes a father, when Jacob becomes Israel, when a shepherd becomes the Pharaoh's greatest adversary, when an undistinguished farmer becomes a military leader and "the greatest judge"—these are stories of unfathomable, life-altering transformation.

So when the angels appear in blinding lights to the shepherds in the middle of the night, the herdsmen may be surprised, and they may fear death...but my guess is that, more than anything, they realize that there is a really good chance their lives are about to change—dramatically, rapidly, and permanently.

There is a reason why Sarah laughs, Jacob wrestles, Moses protests, and Gideon asks for sign after sign that this is really happening to him. It is the same reason that the shepherds "fear with great fear." It is because—when we are confronted with a life-altering change, one that will strike at our very hearts and souls—it is rare that we are immediately on board with the plan. Instead, we are typically skeptical, awestruck, and afraid.

This was, I think, what was happening to the shepherds 2000 years ago as they watched their flocks by night. They were living a simple life. They didn't have to try to explain a miracle to anyone, didn't have to try to tell people why a baby in a manger was a big deal, certainly didn't have to account for the appearance of heavenly spirits in a nighttime sky. But after the angels appear, they do go into Bethlehem, compelled by the heavenly host, and witness the infant in swaddled cloths. And afterwards, they do go out and tell everyone who will listen what had happened to them. In a flash of light, their lives were changed—dramatically and permanently.

* * *

The floodlights or spotlights that shine on a prisoner, a soldier, or a spy—the stereotypes I referenced at the top of this sermon—invoke fear and paralyze. They attack with a strategy of trapping. They do not hope to bring change.

But the heavenly light that accompanies the angels in Luke is a different kind of light. It is a light that shines so brightly that it eliminates all darkness, shining truth and goodness into the deepest crevices of our world and forcing us to reckon with all aspects of who we are and of who we want to be. It is also a light of grace and mercy, one that illuminates that goodness and offers it to us in ways that had previously eluded humanity. The light of Christmas transforms.

And we are, like the shepherds, understandably fearful about being transformed by that light, by the birth of a baby in a stable, by the idea that God exists among us in human form and understands us so intimately. It is a terrifying thought, when we actually think about it.

* * *

My life has been changed like this—suddenly and rapidly and eternally—only when I have added someone to my family. It changed like this when I got married and each time I gained a daughter. Those were moments where I opened up to love—to the deep and holy love that is *agape*—and that *agape* love brought transformation with it. As those moments struck me, I was absolutely afraid—excited, reverent, hopeful, and joyful, but afraid...but, as the angel told the shepherds, the goodness overwhelms the fear, and we need not be afraid...even if we can't quite help ourselves.

Each Advent, we celebrate qualities of light, the experiences of hope and peace and joy and love...but that last one is particularly tricky. The love of Christmas is not the love of Hallmark. It is a deep and abiding covenant that we choose to enter into...and when we make that choice, we find our lives transformed, with all of the wonder and reverence and fear that comes with being transformed. This is why the shepherds on a Bethlehem hillside found themselves afraid at the sight of the angels before them. They knew, at least a little, of the revolutionary love that the light was bringing them, and that it brings to us.