

Overcoming Fear thru the Miracle of Christmas

Dear Friends,

Fear is mounting worldwide as one mass murder after another takes place. At this time, we are watching the words of Jesus found in Luke 21:25, 26 being fulfilled before us; "... upon the earth distress of nations with perplexity... men's (and women's) hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth; for the powers of heaven shall be shaken."

For the followers of Jesus there is a freedom of fear that passes all understanding. This freedom comes from surrendering ourselves by faith, into the care of God. It means putting ourselves completely under His wisdom, power, and provision. If we do so, the God of heaven and earth promises to be totally responsible for our daily provision because He is a God of Love.

This reality was driven home to me when I visited Rob and Judy who direct the By His Grace Food Pantry in Sutherland Springs, Texas. This outreach is run by the First Baptist Church. This is the church where the largest mass murder that had ever taken place in a sanctuary had happened twelve days earlier.

The previous director of the food pantry was Lula White. She was one of the 26 who had been killed in the church on Sunday, November 5 while 20 others were wounded. It became clear as I talked to Rob and Judy, that they along with other members of the congregation who remained alive, were determined to continue to serve the Lord as they found security in His love.

In order for us to experience this love we must believe the words that the Angel spoke to the shepherds in Luke 2:10-11. There we are told, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is the Messiah, the Lord."

Christmas can be one of the brightest times of the year, full of wonders and miracles, or it can be a time of darkness, distress and fear. When we respond like Mary did in Luke 1:38, "let it be to me according to your word" we give God permission to let the sunrise of His love take place and the supernatural unfold in our lives.

The reason we often miss the supernatural Christ of Christmas is because misguided materialism drives us into a frenzied pace that turns the wonders of Christmas into a time of fear, depression and frustration.

I was reminded by my new friends in Sutherland Springs that "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fears," (1 John 4:18).

If we believe that we are loved, we will experience the powerful antidote to the poison of fear which is the love of God. It's a fact that Jesus loves us and knows exactly who and what we need.

Our loving heavenly Father knew we needed a Savior. As a result we read in John 3:16 that, "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him shall not perish but have life everlasting".

The Christmas gift described in John 3:16 frees us to live a life that is not paralyzed by fear. Now we need to stop fearing the future and let the God-of-the-now live in us. As we look at the new commandment that Jesus gives us in John 13:34, we see that it tells us to, "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another."

Pastor Frank Pomeroy and his wife Sherri had been out of town on that Sunday when tragedy struck his church. The following Sunday under a large tent he declared to a record number of people attending the service, "Rather than choose darkness that the young man did that day, we choose life. Frank and Sherri's 14-year-old daughter, Annabelle, were among those killed in the November 5th rampage.

"I know everyone who gave their life that day. Some of whom were my best friends and my daughter. I guarantee they are dancing with Jesus today."

No matter what life may bring, this Christmas, we can celebrate the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The fact is He died for our sins and this allows us to dance with Jesus for all eternity. Those who don't feel like dancing with Jesus need to re-read the Christmas Story which is filled with one, "fear not" after another.

The angel said to Mary, "Fear not, Mary... The Holy Ghost will come upon you, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow you... For with God nothing shall be impossible" (Luke 1:30, 35, 37).

As we struggle with God's promise and plans for us, we need to let His "fear not" reassure us that His power and provision is sufficient to meet every need. In Luke 2:10-11 we see the angel telling the shepherds to, "fear not: for, behold, I bring to you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the City of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord."

Just as the shepherds were told, even so we must also be reminded that in spite of the circumstances, miracles are often born in the least expected times and places! Joseph was reminded of this when the angel told him, "Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife" (Matt. 1:20). As Joseph, we also must be reminded that faith means loving someone enough to not judge him or her or cast them aside. Instead we need to trust that God is at work in his or her life. Joseph, instead of walking out on the relationship, believed God's promise and stuck with it despite the circumstances.

Rob, Judy, Pastor Frank and Sherri did not let the murder of their church family stop them. Sherri said, "Our church was not comprised of members or parishioners. We were a very close family. We ate together, we laughed together, we cried together, and we worshipped together."

As I toured that church sanctuary, I saw 26 white chairs with a rose along with a cross and the name of the person killed there painted on each chair. As I observed this I knew I was in the presence of the Lord. The words of those killed and wounded, which was recorded at previous services played in the background. Each testified of their faith and reminded me of the need to trust the Christ of Christmas each and every day of the year.

Jesus declares, "I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in Me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in My name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask Me for anything in My name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask Me for anything in My name and I will do it" (John 14:12-14).

With a promise like that, we have no excuse for letting fear into our lives. But that is not all; Jesus has given us the "Spirit of Truth," the Holy Spirit and "He lives with you and will be in you" (John 14:17).

Jesus goes on to promise, "But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, Whom the Father will send in My name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you" (John 14:26).

Now in the name of Jesus, we must let fear be gone as we let the Holy Spirit work in our lives. For Jesus says, "Peace I leave with you; My peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid" (John 14:27).

This peace is possible if we, as branches remain in Jesus, the vine. Jesus declares in John 15:5, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a person remains in Me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from Me you can do nothing."

Rob and Judy believed these words of Jesus. For some reason they could not explain why they had arrived at church late that Sunday morning of November 5. When they got to church, the wounded were being brought out of the church by first responders. It was then they knew God had kept them alive for a purpose.

I saw that purpose being lived out as Rob and Judy ministered to those who had come for food at the pantry, which was located in a house next to the church. Many of these poor and elderly people had expressed their grief over the death of Lula White, the previous food pantry director, and others who had been killed.

Earlier that day as my son Chris and I traveled to Sutherland Springs I had voiced my frustration over how New Life Evangelistic Center had been driven out of our church building at 1411 Locust. Now in my final conversation with Rob I felt the Holy Spirit wanted to drive home to me how important it was that I also remained true to the mission God had given me. I found myself saying, "We both have been driven out of our church buildings. You and your congregation by a mad man who shot over half the congregation. We have been driven out by wealthy condominium owners who don't want our homeless church members in the neighborhood. But we can't give up. The church is bigger than a building. We will continue in spite of what the devil might throw at us for "Greater is He who is in us (Christ) than he who is in the world."

Rob and Judy readily agreed and continued to share with me the miracles they were seeing take place.

As they shared Deuteronomy 20:3, 4 came to mind where it says, "Do not be fainthearted or afraid; do not be terrified or give way to panic before them. For the Lord your God is the one who goes with you." Now it is important that we boldly share Jesus in word and deed with everyone we come in contact with.

We are told to "Fear not, because Christ has taken the curse of sin upon Himself for us. "Because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse" (Deut. 21:22).

We are told in Hebrews 2:15, 15 that, “By His death He might destroy him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil; and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.”

Liberated from a fear of death, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we are now free, like Rob and Judy, to live and reach out to those in need. Deut. 24:10-22, and Deut. 27: 19 show God’s great concern for the needy: In Deut. 28 we see what blessings await those who obey the Lord. In that same chapter we are also see what happens to those who disobey. It is fear, which often paralyzes and keeps individuals from reaching out to the poor and homeless. If we are going to be truly effective in the work of God we must let Him lift us above our fears, freeing us to be there when people are hurting.

We must let every Christmas light that we see remind us that, “God is light, pure light; there’s not a trace of darkness in Him. If we claim that we experience a shared life with Him and continue to stumble around in the dark, we’re obviously lying through our teeth—we’re not living what we claim. But if we walk in the light, God Himself being the light, we also experience a shared life with one another, as the sacrificed blood of Jesus, God’s Son, purges all our sins.” (1 John 1, The Message Bible)

At first Zacharias did not accept the promise the angel was sharing with him. As a result of his doubting, he was not able to speak until the angel’s words were fulfilled in their own time” (Luke 1:20). Even though his faith was slow, he remained faithful. After he held his newborn son in his own two hands, he was able to speak and he declared, “his name is John”, then Zacharias offered a song of praise to God (See Luke 1:57-80). The last part of this song of praise goes like this, “Through the heartfelt miracles of our God, God’s Sunrise will break in upon us, shining on those in the darkness, those sitting in the shadow of death. Then showing us the way, one foot at a time, down the path of peace” (The Message Bible).

No matter what we have been through this year we must allow the miracles of Christmas to work in our lives knowing that the wonder of Christmas is upon us. Let us believe and fear not, knowing that the wonder of Christmas is upon us. Christ is risen, and it is His light that has driven the darkness from our lives. The light of the Christ whose birth we celebrate has driven the darkness from our lives as His death and resurrection has provided us freedom from sin both now and for all eternity.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Larry Rice". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the typed name "Larry Rice".

Larry Rice