

“What do you fear? Good news is louder than fear”

by Pastor Leah Rosso

Christmas Eve 2025

There's a lot of tension in the Christmas story as told by Luke. Did you hear it? It's the tension between fear and hope. Really, in all of the stories of Advent and Christmas, from Mary hearing the news from the angel that she will bear a son; to Joseph dreaming of how he is called to care for Mary; to tonight, when the shepherds hear the angels and decide to go see what God is up to; all of these stories carry with them great fear that is a daily experience in 1st Century Judea; and the hope that God is doing something new. In a world of fear, the writer of the Gospel of Luke wants to point us towards hope- to show us that good news is louder than fear. Sometimes this is hard to do, especially as a parent.

I recently connected with an experience that author and teacher Joseph Sarosy told. One night as he was settling in with his daughter, they were listening to a story podcast when he realized the story was too scary for her. He quickly turned it off, but not before his child was already very scared. That night was pretty rough in their house as his daughter dealt with all of the fears that the story had brought up in her, including fear of a parent dying and of kids being abandoned. This went on for a couple of nights, with Joseph feeling like a terrible father, and then he got an idea - he would finish the story. He knew that neurologically, we as humans can't *not* think about scary things because the more we try not to think about them, the more our brain tries to find its way back to process them. So asking his daughter to just not think about the story wasn't working. He also knew that the more often we think about something, our brain makes a pathway to that thing, increasing the time we spend thinking about it. For kids, this can be truly difficult because they have a much harder time keeping scary things at arm's length. So Joseph took the elements of the story that they had heard, and he began to retell the story, answering all of the questions his daughter had and was worried about. It wasn't quick. He knew it wouldn't help to just take out the scary parts; they were already embedded. But what he could do was share other aspects of the story - the resiliency of the kids; the love they experienced from their Mom even after her death; and the other people who, when the story could continue, showed up to help. By the end, Joseph and his daughter were weaving in humor and fun that made the scary parts more manageable for her and brought connection and hope back into their experience. (1)

The author of the Gospel of Luke aims to do exactly this as he writes the story of Jesus' birth, with real life as the fearful backdrop. Luke and his audience were all too familiar with the tools of the Roman Empire — the way they wielded taxes and armies and decrees to create fear and flex their muscles. So as Luke tells the story of Jesus' birth, his aim is to help those living in fear to hear how God is present. He wants to tell the story with clues to his listeners as to how God's power and might looks vastly

different from the Roman Empire, highlighting the hope that we can have because of God's ingenuity and love.

And so the story begins as Luke tells us that in those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. I want you to imagine for a moment if everyone in your family had to return to their place of birth in the same week of the year. It would be chaos, wouldn't it? Now imagine if you had to walk to where you were born. From the very outset of the story, as the whole world has to move - a reach that is stunning even for the Roman Emperor - Luke brings us into what it is like in his world; a world that is like living in the chess board of the Emperor. He makes ridiculous decrees, and everyone jumps. In contrast, Luke goes on to tell us about Joseph and Mary, a young couple who are expecting a child. In a time when everyone is being forced into mass migration, Mary and Joseph travel to Bethlehem, and the fear would've been palpable: to be expecting a child and knowing they'll be away from home when she gives birth; to face the dangers of travel in those days — all of these fears would've been fully present as they go to Bethlehem under the uneasy watch of tyrants. But Mary and Joseph are not alone. Even though it looks like the Emperor is calling the shots, God is at work in this humble couple as they go to the birthplace of King David- you may remember David as the boy who took down the giant Goliath—and it is in that holy city that Jesus is born. The Emperor seems to have all the power, all the control; and yet in a strange set of events, a young couple who don't even have a room to stay, give birth to Jesus under the radar; maybe even off the books.

And while they are in the city, out in the fields there are shepherds keeping watch over their flocks. They are so poor, perhaps so rebellious, they've decided not to go get registered. And while they are there an angel army arrives. You may have missed the reference because we don't use the language of "a multitude of the heavenly hosts" anymore; but what Luke is basically saying is that there is an army of angels—it's no wonder the shepherds were terrified! But unlike the Roman armies, marching through town and creating fear; Luke shows a joyful crowd of angels that are in direct service to God. They show up in the least likely of places, and instead of carrying weapons and making life miserable, these armies sing! Luke takes one of the most scary situations in his life and makes it beautiful. He turns power upside down showing that God's authority and might takes the shape of angel wings and songs and good news for the poor. And then those angels make their own decree— that today is born in the city of David, the Messiah, the Lord — and that there will be a sign; they will find a baby in a manger. Surely this is not the sign the shepherds would've asked for - to see another poor baby. Surely they wanted a miraculous sign of riches and power and might! But Luke is showing us how God chooses to work — through ordinary people who live in fear, and through the most vulnerable of us all, an infant.

It may seem like a strange way to bring hope and courage in a world of fear: to bring peace instead of weapons; to come as a baby instead of a powerful King; to show up to those on the fringes, the migrants who don't even belong, instead of to the well

established. But it is precisely because God doesn't come as another tyrant; that God's tools of choice are love and dignity and lifting up the poor, that this story brings hope. It doesn't ignore what there is to be afraid of; instead the story of Christ's birth reminds us that God comes to us in all times and in all places.

One of the most beloved Christmas movies in our house is the classic Charlie Brown Christmas. In it we meet Charlie Brown, of course, and his friend Linus who is always carrying around his blankie. Linus is the really the character that makes us ask every year, how old are these kids supposed to be? Because while there is never an adult around, even when they go to buy a Christmas tree, Linus is always carrying around his blanket and sucking on his thumb. When they rehearsing for the Christmas pageant, Linus is the one whining about how he'll never remember his lines and when his sister threatens to take away his blanket, Linus quickly makes it into his costume so he won't have to let it go. And yet, when Charlie Brown can't figure out what Christmas is all about, Linus looks at his friend and confidently says, "I'll tell you Charlie Brown." And then he moves to the center of the stage and he begins to tell this very story of Jesus' birth. For the first time this year, in all the years I've watched it, I noticed that in that moment, Linus doesn't have his blanket. He doesn't have a script. He just tells this very story - the story of Jesus' birth, with all of the fear wrapped inside of it; and all of the hope that it points to; and he's not afraid at all.

What does the Emporer want most? For the people to be afraid. So when the angel tells Mary to not be afraid; when the angel tells Joseph to not be afraid; when the angel army tells the shepherds not to be afraid, they aren't being naive or ignoring the circumstances. They do so as a sign of revolution. Choosing to trust God rather than the sound of fear is resistance.

We still live in a world of fear. And God is still upending the powerful and choosing the humble. Our job is to lean in and insist on hope; to come together as a community and find our courage to stand with one another; to keep our eyes open for the angels; to welcome the stranger who knocks on our door when there is no room elsewhere; and to boldly proclaim that God has good news: each child born among us is a sign; God has come to be with us and God's love extends to all.

Resources Cited/Consulted:

1) Sarosy, Joseph: <https://howtotellstoriestochildren.com/blog1/how-stories-transform-fear-the-science-behind-it>

2) Sanctified Art's Advent Resources: "What do you fear? Insisting on Hope"

3) Maryann McKibben Dana's book *Hope: A Manual*