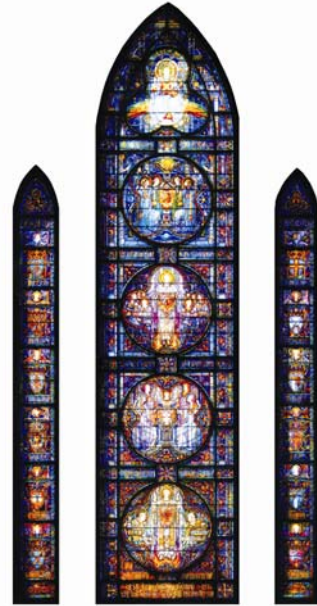


December 24, 2011

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Sermons



The Fear of Christmas

By The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

Luke 2:9b

As I drove to the church yesterday, I heard the commentator on NPR relating how the whole country of Italy is gripped by fear this Christmas. Fear of what next year may bring - recession or perhaps a depression. Because of past indiscretions by the Italian government, taxes will go up dramatically next year and pensions will go down. Not only are shop keepers feeling the pinch this Christmas, but restaurants - a focal point of life in Italy - are seeing 50% less business than they saw during last year's holiday season. Of course the Euro crisis is engendering fear on this side of the Atlantic as well.

In fact, fear abounds this Christmas. It's lurking behind every Christmas tree and every caroler. Will the economy ever come back? How about employment opportunities for graduating college students? What about Dayton's housing market? We are anxious about the unstable governments in Iran and North Korea with their nuclear capabilities; and will Iraq unravel into civil war? Some of us are worried about the Democrats, while others of us are worried about the Republicans.

It's interesting we fear the economy and the strange events in the Middle East, but not Christmas. We're afraid, but not of God. Bill Coffin was right when he wrote, "We fear everything except the one great unique event of which we should properly be afraid - the revelation of God."

Laurie just now related in the Luke narrative that the shepherds were "terrified," and in as much as it is night about us so are we. I don't know about you but I find myself almost daily - not just at Christmas - impressed by what seems to be an overriding fear in our time and place. It's a spiritual fear - the spiritual fear of being reduced. It seems to have a life of its own in each one of us. The weak economy plays into this spiritual fear of being reduced. And, so does unemployment. And, the fear of the heightened destructiveness of each succeeding generation. And, of course, the fear of becoming old and lonely. These are all real fears as you well know; fears of uncertainty, fears of the night. Over all, hovers the fear of death.

So let us return to the shepherds for this first Christmas night *their* fears are undergoing a radical transformation. Earlier they had feared the night. Now, suddenly their fear of darkness is nothing compared to their fear of light. You've seen the pictures, you've heard the text in word and song. "And the glory of the Lord shone round about them, and they were sore afraid." Suddenly their fears of all kinds of uncertainties are effaced by the awe they experience in the presence of one great certainty. Instead of death they start to fear life. It must have been a fantastic conversion experience; instead of many uncertainties, one certainty; instead of many little fears, one great fear.

Oswald Chambers put it this way, "The remarkable thing about fearing God is that when you fear God you fear nothing else, whereas if you do not fear God, you fear everything else."

To return to us: isn't our trouble that we are a bundle of small terrors, sometimes overwhelming? We have so many little fears, but no great fear. About this and that and the other, we have many little questions, but rarely do we pose the all-important question: ***does God exist, and if so how are we to fill the time and space allotted us?*** We put down our roots in flowerpots and expect to grow and flourish like great oak trees!

We fear the lab report, but not Christmas. We're afraid, but not of God. In fact, we are so concerned, most of us, with darkness instead of light, with death instead of

life, that the great comforting command addressed to the shepherds, "Fear not," which if heeded could take care of all fears including the one great fear—that command we don't even hear.

"Fear not, for unto you is born this day"—not a stern judge of all our pathetic fears, but "a savior." Can you believe it? A savior is born. The chains of love are stronger than the chains of fear. God incarnate is the end of fear. Heaven is touching earth with healing. God is humanizing the heavens and spiritualizing the earth, welding the two in one inseparable unit.

"Fear not, for **unto you.**" For **your** sake, God is not content to be God, but has instead willed to become a human being. For **you** he has emptied himself so that you might not be reduced, but exalted. God doesn't want His glorification, he wants **your** glorification. To you, he has given himself in love that you might in love be drawn to him. It's all for you, for **you** regardless of who you are, for all of us; not a single one is found wanting. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16)

And finally, "Fear not, for unto you is born **this day.**" Not tomorrow, not next week, not next year. Now. Now is the time of this gift, and now is the time for us to decide. God is not a charismatic leader demanding that we give over to him our freedom of choice. He only insists that we exercise the freedom of choice which he has given us. So, friends, what is going to grip you: the economy or Christmas? What do you choose to fear death or life? Will it be darkness or the light that "shines on in the darkness for the darkness did not overcome it?" (John 1:5)

"And the glory of the Lord shone round about them and they were sore afraid." (Luke 2:9) May the glory of the Lord shine around us this Christmas and scare us - to life. Then may we hear the comforting command "Fear not!"