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## **The Healing of Fearful Hearts**

Isaiah 35:4a

One of the important themes of Advent is that the God who comes into our world changes everything, including our experience of fear. The human struggle with fear is addressed throughout the Bible. The prophet Isaiah wrote to a frightened nation. Judah was small and weak. It was constantly threatened by the major powers in the region. There was always a powerful foreign army poised to march on Judah leaving death and destruction in its wake. Isaiah was ministering to people who had good reason to be afraid.

Fear is a crucial issue for Isaiah and other biblical writers because it is a potent enemy of life. John Buchanan, pastor of Fourth Presbyterian in Chicago, says it like this:

It is hard to love when you are afraid. It is impossible to be joyful about anything when you are afraid. Fear limits life, constrains life, pollutes life. Fear can be a good thing when it alerts us to danger. But when fear becomes overwhelming, alertness diminishes, and adrenalin floods the body, riveting the body on the object of fear. Tunnel vision occurs and fear takes over. That's exactly what happened to us after 9/11. Fear took over and its effects are still evident, and tragically we began to behave in ways that contradict and deny our highest values. (John Buchanan, *Journal for Preachers*, Advent, 2010, pages 11-12).

Isaiah understood how destructive fear could be. He wanted to make sure that his people understood that even though they had good reason to fear they need not live by fear. The presence of our God who is stronger than our fear changes everything. Isaiah proclaims:

Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear!" Here is your God (Isaiah 35:4a)

At the funeral of John Knox the Earl of Morton described the Reformation leader as a man "who never feared." This was an intriguing description of the life of a man who lived in the vortex of a dangerous and brutal time. As a young man he was taken captive by the French and was forced to spend 19 months rowing a galley ship. Most people did not survive that kind of sentence. Friends of his were burned at the stake in Scotland and England. He fled England to avoid being executed by Queen Mary I. He saw firsthand violent persecution of Reformed churches in France. For much of his life there were death threats hanging over him.

To claim that a person who lived this kind of life never feared strains credulity. The larger point that the Earl of Morton probably wanted to make was that John Knox never lived by fear. He refused to let his fear control him or get in the way of the dangerous work he was called to do. His friends could say he never feared because he kept his eyes focused on the God who came to change everything.

This is the point that Jesus makes at the moment that fear is closing in on John the Baptist. In the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew we read that John the Baptist sends messengers to Jesus to ask him a

question. John wants to know if Jesus is the one who is to come or should he look for another. This is an amazing question for John to ask of Jesus. He had known Jesus since childhood. He had baptized Jesus in the Jordan River and had heard the voice from heaven which affirmed Jesus' special identity. But as John languishes in prison knowing he may be executed, fear becomes his greatest enemy. The love, joy, and hope which have been at the center of his life are beginning to crumble and he wonders if it was all worthwhile.

The answer Jesus gives to John is the same message Isaiah directed to his fearful people. Look at what God is doing in the world. "Go and tell John what you hear and see: 'the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf can hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them (Matthew 11:5)". God has come to change everything. You can give your fear to God.

Some of you had the opportunity to get to know my mother during the years she lived here before her death in 2007. My mother liked to tell a story about my son Deron when he was about eight years old. We didn't let our children watch very much television when they were young. Most of Deron's television viewing at this age had been the evening news which Barbara and I watched. The coverage of the shooting of President Reagan made him afraid to go to bed at night. He worried that someone might come and shoot us, too. He was having one of these bouts of anxiety one night when my parents were taking care of him. According to Gramma, who was always right about these things, it was Grandpa who found a way to heal his grandson's fearful heart. When Deron complained that he was too worried to sleep, Grandpa said, "Deron, let me worry for you." Gramma remembered that Deron said, "Would you do that for me, Grandpa?" When his Grandpa said, "Yes," he calmed down and went to sleep.

In those times when fear closes in and threatens to undo us, we can give it all to God. The God who came as a babe at Christmas is ready to bear this burden for us.