

**YOU SHALL FEAR DISASTER NO MORE**  
**a Christmas Eve sermon by Dr. David Palmer**  
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**based on Zephaniah 3:14–15**

If there is one word that characterizes what many people feel as they look at our world today, it is the word “fear.” Fear is so prevalent on so many levels that social commentators talk about how we live in a culture of fear. But of course fear is nothing new for the human race. In the Biblical story of the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve disobey God, and having alienated themselves from God they hide themselves in the garden. When God calls out to them saying, “Where are you?” (Genesis 3:9) the man responds, “I hid myself, because I was afraid.” (Genesis 3:10)

Here the story is describing our basic human condition since the dawn of time. We all turn from God—we forget God and go our own way, which is what the Bible describes with the word sin—and as we separate ourselves from God in sin, what we all experience is fear. In the story of Adam and Eve, the man goes on to say that the reason he is afraid is because he has no clothes. (. . . *because I was naked* Genesis 3:10) That, however, did not bother him before, and the only other person in the garden is his wife. So why exactly is he afraid? What he is feeling at this point is not embarrassment, but vulnerability. He realizes that he is exposed and defenseless.

Thus the Bible illustrates the root of our human fear. In our alienation from God, we realize that we are exposed to trouble; and trouble is coming at us from all different directions. Political and economic uncertainty, threats from ISIS, health troubles, conflicts, family difficulties—we face threats on endless levels, and beyond it all is the overwhelming threat of death. So we spend a lot of energy trying to hide ourselves from trouble or avoid it, but we realize deep down that we are defenseless.

Perhaps you’ve heard the story of two explorers who were on safari when suddenly a lion jumped in front of them. The one explorer said to the other, “Remember what we read in that book. If you stand still and look the lion in the eye, the lion will turn and run away.” “Sure,” said the other explorer. “You’ve read the book, and I’ve read the book. But has the lion read the book?”

The problem is that our problems often don’t run away; and if we stand alone against the great threats of life, we are truly defenseless and in serious trouble. The book of the prophet Zephaniah talks at length along this line. Zephaniah perceived that the people of Israel in their sinfulness had distanced themselves from God, and as they stood alone in the world, he spoke about a whole series of disasters that were coming upon them. His book is full of gloom; the people had good reason to be afraid. But then at the very end of the book, there is a sharp turn, as Zephaniah hears a message from God and proclaims, “Sing aloud, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart. The Lord has taken

away the judgments against you; he has turned away your enemies. The King of Israel, is in your midst. You shall fear disaster no more.” [Zephaniah 3:14-15]

Zephaniah perceives that God is going to act decisively for the salvation of His people. God is going to act in such a way that God will remove the sin of the people, God will turn away what threatens them; God will be in their midst, and therefore they need fear disaster no more. What Zephaniah proclaims is exactly what happens at Christmas.

It is highly significant that in the Christmas stories the most recurrent refrain is “Fear not.” When an angel appears to Zechariah, to announce the birth of John the Baptist, the angel says, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah.” (Luke 1:13) When the angel appears to Mary, again the angel says, “Fear not, Mary.” (Luke 1:30) When the angel appears to Joseph, again we hear, “Joseph, do not be afraid . . .” (Matthew 1:20) And to cap it all off, when the angel appears to the shepherds, the first words pronounced to them are, “Fear not.” (Luke 2:10)

And why do we not need to be afraid? It is because God in Christ is doing precisely what Zephaniah proclaimed. In the birth of Jesus Christ, God comes into our midst, which is why Jesus is called Emmanuel, meaning “God with us.” In Christ God acts to take away our sin—“taking away the judgments against us,” as Zephaniah put it, restoring us to fellowship with God. Through Christ God “turns away our enemies,” as Zephaniah said, including the greatest enemy of death. If we are on our own in this world, we do have much reason to fear. But now, as Zephaniah proclaims, God is in our midst, and so truly “we need fear disaster no more.”

Thus the Christmas story invites us to turn from fear to faith, and this is exactly what we see Zechariah and Mary and Joseph and the shepherds doing as they hear the call to “fear not.” They each had plenty of reason for fear, but they responded to the Lord in faith. So we are called to trust in God who is with us, to be open to how God will now work in our lives, and to share in how we today can be a part of the story of good news through Jesus Christ. In faith we receive Christ to dwell in us; and when we do that, we no longer need be afraid.

We may continue to live in a world full of threat and fear. But we do not need to be people of fear. We can be people of faith; and so we can journey in real hope, and join with Christ in bringing light to the world around us.