



What are you afraid of? Here are some fears you may not have heard of:

Achluophobia – Fear of darkness

Bibliophobia – Fear of books

Blennophobia – Fear of slime

Doraphobia – Fear of fur or skins of animals

Homilophobia – Fear of sermons

For most of us, the fears we struggle with are different. Chapman University conducted a survey in October 2014 to discover the top five fears of Americans. Here's the list:

- » Walking alone at night
- » Becoming the victim of identity theft
- » Safety on the internet
- » Being the victim of a mass/random shooting
- » Public speaking

How does a person deal with fear? Fear is an autonomic reaction to perceived danger. Fear is a God-designed protection that we experience when we perceive a threat. When the level of fear is appropriately balanced to the perceived danger, it's a blessing. For example, when you see a lion, you run away. However, when the level of fear moves to the extremes, problems arise. A thoughtful and aware person can't become completely fearless because that would be like the ostrich burying its head in the sand. Here's something to consider: should the Christmas story significantly reduce the level of fear you face and experience?

NASA astronaut, Chris Hadfield, said the scariest thing he's ever done is ride a rocket ship to space, traveling at 5 miles/second. To overcome the rational and justified fear that this produces, NASA provides rigorous training to every astronaut. During Chris' 20 years of training, he learned the Russian language, orbital mechanics in Russian, vehicle control theory; he practiced in the flight simulator for thousands of hours.

Astronauts aren't just trained to do their job. They are trained for every conceivable variation, anything that might go wrong. As a result, Chris wasn't afraid when he was traveling 5 miles/second. He was laughing because it was so thrilling. He was having fun because he was prepared. On the NPR TED Radio Hour episode on fear he said, "proper preparation overcomes fear."

That phrase, "proper preparation overcomes fear," stuck with me and I thought about how it connects with the Biblical teachings about fear.

When the angels appeared to Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds they told each of them "Fear not." Not because fear was illogical for them; they were afraid, just like people today. They were afraid of the angel, their reputation, their future, their livelihood. That was a logical reaction.

So why tell them "fear not?" Were the angels expecting them to behave illogically? No. The angels were offering them something better than logic—the Incarnation.

The angels parted the curtain of creation, entered time and space to give Joseph, Mary and the shepherds their first step in being properly prepared to face every danger and every fear. Remember what Chris Hatfield said, "proper preparation overcomes fear." That's what the angel was doing. The angel who appeared to Joseph said,

**This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.**

**But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."**

**All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us") (Matthew 1:18–23).**

### **Immanuel – God With Us**

This short, three-word message—"God with us"—can prepare us for anything we might face in life and fill our hearts with hope, courage and confidence because the Incarnation supersedes logic. It eradicates fear.

For a construct to today's sermon, I'm going to spend time explaining each of these three words:

**God** with us

God **with** us

God with **us**

### **GOD with us**

Immanuel is telling us that Jesus Christ is God. The simple meaning of Christmas is that the creator of the universe became a human being. The scripture cannot resist telling us this throughout. In fact, nothing in Christianity makes sense if you don't understand this.

When Jesus was baptized a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." Later when Jesus was praying on the Mount of Olives with his three closest disciples, a cloud descended and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" When the high priest was interrogating Jesus, he asked him, "Are you the Messiah?" Jesus answered, "I am." There are no doubts that Jesus claimed to be God's Son and to be God himself.

In addition to direct references like these, it is always implied that Jesus was God throughout the New Testament also. For example, Jesus forgives people of their sins. He can only do this because the sinful acts were against him. Otherwise forgiveness makes no sense. If my neighbor burns my house down, then apologizes for this act to his sister who lives in Utah, what would the sister say? She'd ask, "Why are you apologizing to me? I'm not the person you wronged." Apologies and forgiveness only make sense between the people involved.

It's the same with Jesus. When someone sins, this is an offensive act against God. Jesus was claiming to be God every time he offered forgiveness of sins to people. Another way this is implied, whenever somebody bowed before an angel, (Daniel, John) the angel always said, "Get up, for I'm just a creature like you." But whenever somebody bowed before Jesus, he accepts it.

A third way this was implied is that his followers believed Jesus was God and worshipped him. This is a very unusual, almost unique act. The earliest people, who knew everything about Jesus, worshipped him. You can't fool people when you live with them. They see you at your worst moments: selfishness, bad habits, laziness, over indulgences; they see your sin. Yet the people who knew Jesus the best, the people who lived with him saw no worst moments. Instead, they saw justification from his life that he was God. They'd never met a person like him; full of grace and truth. And these people not only believed him to be God in the flesh, they were willing to die for that belief.

Jesus couldn't have been a great man only. Have you wrestled with this? Have you settled the question of Jesus being God?

This past week Cassie and I went to our son's 2nd grade classroom to teach on the meaning of Christmas in America. We were 1 of 6 different "guest teachers" who visited his classroom to teach on various holiday traditions. From the kids perspective, we were just another presentation. Is that how I would evaluate that experience? No. Amidst many opinions on life, eternity, morality and deities, the evidence is overwhelmingly supportive that Christmas is really about God becoming human. Jesus Christ is Immanuel. My heart is burdened that each of the 25 kids in Simon's class know this.

Have you considered the claims that Jesus made to be God? Christianity claims that the story of Christmas isn't just one potential explanation for God but it is the **only** explanation. All of this is being communicated by the word God in the phrase, **God with us**.

### **God WITH us**

The great God of the universe enters our humanity to live alongside us. When God is **with** you it is different that just hearing about God. Since God entered humanity, people were able to touch Jesus. People made eye contact with Jesus. People felt his compassion, his love, his concern. All because God came to be **with us**.

Whenever God had come near in the Old Testament, God was terrifying.

» Joel = whirlwind

» Abraham = smoking furnace moving through the air. Radiated heat.

» Moses = pillar of fire. His face radiated light because he saw the back side of God.

Every time God showed up, until Jesus, he was terrifying. With Jesus it was totally different. When Jesus entered humanity, he changed everything.

Can you imagine Moses' reaction if he were here today and he heard the words of John 1:1, "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*" Or John 1:14, "*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son.*" Moses would be jumping up and saying, "Do you realize what you have access to? The God who appeared to me in a cloud to protect me from his holiness has walked on earth. The God, whose presence is so holy my face shined from his radiance, has clothed himself in flesh so He can be **with** you. Unbelievable! He's been **with** you. You can know him so intimately! And then the Spirit fills you when you place your faith in God. The Spirit, inside of you! Where's your joy?" What would you say to Moses?

This is the personal nature of Christianity that's unique among every other belief system. God doesn't stand at a distance

expecting people to know about Him. He came to be **with** us so each of us could know him personally.

Martin Luther was a seminary teacher for decades. He taught the Bible to future priests. He administered the sacraments. Yet he wasn't a Christian. One day he was studying Romans and he realized he had always been trying to earn God's favor. He didn't understand God's unconditional love. And in a supernatural moment, sitting alone in his room, he went from being a man who heard about God to experiencing him personally for himself. He was a transformed man. And God used him after that experience to transform the global church as the leader of the Protestant Reformation.

When you are **with** Jesus, your life is transformed. Do you know Jesus like this?

Jesus entered the world as a baby to scream out to humanity, "I am approachable. I am not here to scare you. I am here to take away the barrier of sin and be **with** you."

### **God with US**

This is a limited term. He doesn't say God with "all." Who's the "us?" The "us" are people who are invited and say, "yes" to the invitation. People who are humble, like Joseph and Mary and the shepherds, people without an agenda, people without context. God invites people to come to him with nothing. When you acknowledge that you have nothing, and you receive his love, you become one of God's **us**.

This brings the biggest, most transformative change a life can experience. This is the transformation that occurred in Martin Luther. This is the transformation the Apostle Paul described as going from death to life. God's invitation into relationship with him is possible because Jesus was Immanuel: God with us.

Some of you have to remove the limitations and fears in your life. Paul was able to say that love never fails, that he could do all things through Christ who gives him strength. Why was Paul able to say this and some of you can't? He believed that God was, God **with** us. He staked his whole life on it.

What challenges are before you right now that seem so daunting? Why not release the outcome to Jesus? When you trust in him, nothing is impossible. No challenge is too large.

What fears have created the dominant narrative in your thoughts?

Some of you think about your finances more than anything else. You are afraid that your money isn't going to be enough for you bills and you're letting fear control you. Some of you think about the future of your children and grandchildren more than anything else. Some of you are comparing yourself to everyone else and you think you aren't good enough; you're afraid you aren't measuring up, you're afraid you're wasting your life, you're afraid you are missing your purpose in life.

When you confess and repent of these negative thought patterns and turn to Jesus, your perspective shifts from a worldly one to a Godly one. You'll experience the power and victory of Immanuel.

Some of you are thinking, "I've done that before and I'm still fearful." You can't ride on yesterday's faith. Jesus offers daily provision.

Christmas is all about being **near** Jesus. Consider what God did in order to be **with** you. Jesus Christ left the glory and splendor of heaven—a perfect existence without time or limitations or pain or stress or fear—and he came to earth as a baby to be **with** us.

What's keeping you from being near him? Is it a bad habit? Is it your business? Is it fear of giving Jesus full control of everything? Why not take some time in the next four days to move near Jesus.

This past week I spent 30 minutes listening to *O Holy Night* by Christina Aguilera. How did I listen to one song for 30 minutes? I paused it after each phrase and talked to God about the lyrics. This is one example of how you can move near to Jesus.

One of my best friends likes to sit alone in his living room at night, stare at his lit tree and read the Christmas story in Matthew 1 and 2. In the next four days, why not determine right now that you are going to do something to move near to God. Reconnect your heart to the true meaning of Christmas.

Some of you here are lukewarm in your response to God. This is not a rational response. John Stott said, "Anybody who ever met Jesus Christ only had three responses to him. They either were terrified and wanted to run away; they hated him and wanted to kill him and stone him to death; they worshiped him and got down on their knees and gave him everything." You can't say, "Oh, Jesus is interesting, I should know him better." You can't say, "I appreciate the moral teachings of Jesus." Neither approach is rational.

I was meeting with a man this past year who was learning about Jesus and the Bible. He was not a Christian but he was on the path. As we talked, I watched him struggle with his illogical contradictions. He was simultaneously interested in Jesus and appreciated his teaching, yet he wasn't ready to make, in his words, "the scariest decision of my entire life" and invite Jesus into his life and give Jesus control of his entire life.

Either you give yourself to him totally, or you'll be standing before him one day as a stranger trying to explain to him why you tried to live your life your way instead of his way.

For 51 years Bob Edens was blind. He couldn't see a thing. His world was a black hall of sounds and smells. He felt his way through five decades of darkness.

And then he could see.

A skilled surgeon performed a complicated operation and, for the first time, Bob Edens had sight. He found it overwhelming, as you can imagine! He said, "I never would have dreamed that yellow is so ... yellow. I don't have the words. I am amazed by yellow. But red is my favorite color. I just can't believe red."

He went on. "I can see the shape of the moon, and I like nothing better than seeing a jet plane flying across the sky leaving a vapor trail. And of course, sunrises and sunsets. And at night I look at the stars in the sky and the flashing light. You could never know how wonderful everything is." When Bob Edens went from being

a man who heard about color to experiencing it for himself, he was a transformed man.

Now think about Christmas. God wanted humanity, people who had heard about God for centuries, to experience God for themselves.

Jesus came as Immanuel, God **with** us, so we could go beyond people who heard about him to experiencing him for ourselves.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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