

The Christmas carol “Silent Night” is one of my favorites. We’ll sing it together in candle light before we leave here tonight. For me, singing that song is *the* defining moment of the Christmas season. It’s in that moment that Christmas officially arrives.

The second verse of that carol begins “Silent night, holy night, shepherds quake at the sight.” Shepherds quake. Of course that line is based on the scripture we heard earlier from Luke’s gospel, where Luke tells us<sup>1</sup> “there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.” The shepherds were terrified. Sore afraid, the King James translation says. Shepherds quake at the sight.

Some of us just finished reading James Howell’s Advent reflections on Christmas songs. In it he wonders if there’s anything that makes us quake nowadays. He says, “We have a shriveled, shrunken view of the universe, assuming everything is manageable and we are smart enough to figure out all we need to know. But for the shepherds, and for virtually all Christian worshipers until recently, there was something numinous, a mystery, an elusive power before whom you quaked.”<sup>2</sup>

In thinking about quaking I’m reminded of my dog Miles. We live near the ASU football stadium, and last month there was an event there that had fireworks. My kids loved it. My dog did not. Miles had no idea what was going on, and he was scared to death. He couldn’t stop shaking. For Miles it was certainly a mysterious and elusive power before which my little dog quaked uncontrollably in fear. Poor guy!

Though most of us aren’t often reduced to uncontrollable quaking, we’re certainly prone to fear, aren’t we? We hear the news and we’re afraid. We hear about people different from us and we’re afraid. We hear about violence and war and we’re afraid. We hear about disease and sickness and we’re afraid. And fear is a perfectly common human response to such things.

But the bible tells us over and over again (in fact, over 100 times!<sup>3</sup>) “Be not afraid!” Be not afraid. For Christians the only thing that should truly inspire quaking in us is the same thing that made the shepherds quake: experiencing the glory of the Lord all around us.

---

<sup>1</sup> Luke 2:8-9 NRSV

<sup>2</sup> From James Howell’s *Why This Jubilee: Advent Reflections on Songs of the Season*, p. 56

<sup>3</sup> <http://musingsofaministerswife.com/2012/08/03/so-how-many-times-is-fear-not-actually-in-the-bible/>

When my poor little dog was quaking uncontrollably, what eventually settled him down was when my mother gathered him into her arms, held him close, and assured him over and over again that everything was going to be alright. And isn't that the message of the gospel we celebrate tonight as well? All those things we're naturally and sometimes rightly afraid of – they all pale in comparison to the glory of God and the peace that passes understanding when we're in God's presence.

What a strange thing that the Almighty, all-powerful, glorious God of the universe would take on the flesh of a helpless, quivering, vulnerable little baby. But that's the incredible beauty of the incarnation – numinous, mysterious, elusive power wrapped in swaddling clothes. The Word made flesh for our salvation. The one whose birth announcement by the angels made shepherds quake at the sight, whose death made the earth tremble and quake, and whose resurrection shook the foundations of the world, and whose return will one day make the entire universe quake with joy.

Hear this good news tonight: whatever it is that causes us to fear – no matter how dark, or difficult, or depressing – whatever we're facing, whatever we're afraid of, Jesus Christ was born to save us from it. That's the good news of the Christmas story. As the angels proclaimed, "Be not afraid, for I bring you good news of great joy for all people. Born to you this day is a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

James Howell further reflects, "Maybe at Christmas, when we lift our candles and remember that the shepherds quaked, we might quake and recover that lost sense of worship... The Lord came down as a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, his garment of light and life, and we fall on our faces, blown away by the magnitude of God's presence, measured in tiny fingers and a meek cry. We sing, 'Christ the Savior is born!'"<sup>4</sup>

May you quake on this holy night in the presence of God, at the beautiful and glorious mystery of the incarnation. And may you rest in God's arms tonight and always, and be at peace. Amen.

---

<sup>4</sup> Howell from *Jubilee*, p. 56-57