



Christmas is a time for us to remember one of God's most persistent messages, "Don't be afraid. I am with you. I'm on your side."

By Thomas Froese

During the best mornings of the year, I rise early, sit outside and imagine I've just come into the world. I sit in a chair near a bent and gnarly willow at the front of our house. The sun has just risen. The light is gentle. The house is quiet. The street, its schoolyard and daycare in clear sight, is quiet. My spirit is quiet.

In summer the morning routine involves bare feet. In cooler fall or spring, it includes thick, woolly socks that say Papa Bear. Eventually I read some scripture or commentary and continue the exercise rather imperfectly. I'm embarrassed how little scripture I've actually memorized by my age. But I keep at it.

It seems strange, but I also imagine for a moment that I have no family. No wife or children asleep in their beds. I have no dog. No house. No friends. No career. I have no work of any kind. No car to get food or to drive to a show at the old downtown marquee theatre that I enjoy so much. I imagine I have nothing.

This is when I can hear.

And more often than not, what do I hear? "Listen." That's all. "Listen."

Then I can finally stand and give a proper sort of thanks for what I do have – the day ahead, a beating heart and two good legs. If I've been given even more to enjoy or steward, or enjoy and steward both, then bonus. If, now, after listening I have less fear, then even better.

We all have our fears, of course. In this, Christmas can help. It's easy to think the

chief purpose of this seminal holiday is about other things like, say, gifts. I mean, I think I'm as grateful as anyone, but I don't remember many Christmas gifts from the past 50-some years. And my memory is not failing. I'm not that old.

One gift I do remember is a housecoat of many colours that reminds me of the one worn by the boy Joseph. Colour photography itself was still young around 1970, and while I have no idea where it is now, a photo of me from that era, in that housecoat, surfaced now and again over the years. The coat was smooth and purple with other colours. A good length. And it suited me. There's my father in the photo, showing me affection while I wear it on Christmas Day.

My father had that ability, something that wasn't always seen in men of that time. He'd pick me or my sister up and rub his sideburns against our cheeks, and laugh and kiss us. Besides the scratchiness, I'd get a healthy whiff of his aftershave, sweet and earthy. The affection was all the more helpful because our mother, by the time of the housecoat, had already been in eternity for some time. I suppose my father, with such affections, was trying to alleviate his children's fears and sadness.

I believe there's a connection between fear and gratitude, a sort of inverse relationship. It's hard to hold both at once. The more you have of one, the less you have of the other. I find this is true often enough, anyway. And I wonder if as a culture, while fears and anxieties increase, we're losing a measure of gratitude.

In the holiday season, when life's highs and lows are magnified, it's all the easier to crave more and more, even of Christmas itself. People, do we really need to start the Christmas music in November? "It all seems too much of too much," a friend said to me recently. Maybe she was thinking of the dizzying number of holiday sales. Or social gatherings than can get overwhelming. I also find so much can be too much.

"You know, you're a high-functioning introvert," another friend recently told me. I think that's a compliment. But you get the idea of my natural disposition. Also, unlike Good King Wenceslas (who was actually a Bohemian duke and likely rather outgoing), I don't like venturing deep into winter. I have a type of arthritis, a thorn in the flesh for the past 35 years, relating to this. If I was homeless – and this Christmas, many are – I'd die early in the season.

Into all this comes the corrective of the first Christmas. We don't need to dress it up as much as just let it come around and be what it is – a story, first, of common people overcoming fear. "Don't be afraid," Gabriel told Mary while she stood bewildered over her assignment. "Don't be afraid," Gabriel told the shepherds who wondered about the mystery breaking through the night sky. "Don't be afraid," again in the darkness, an angel telling Joseph to run with his family from a mad king hell-bent on killing the young Jesus. And. And. And...

Fear does have its place. Only a fool would not fear a writing deadline. And

only a fool would not fear their Maker. Not in the sense of a child fearing a beating from a parent for some wrongdoing, but a child in fearful awe of a parent who seems so all-knowing and powerful.

Christmas celebrates helpless child and powerful parent.

This is expressed so strikingly, so lyrically, by old Isaiah, his words immortalized in Handel's *Messiah*, now in those compelling if not humorous flash-mob scenes that pop up on our social media. The janitor in some mall food court surprises everyone as he drops his mop and breaks out in tenor voice before, eventually, the entire hidden choir appears and sings like a great wind, "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and the government shall be upon His shoulder; and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace."

Here's something else from Isaiah. "Fear not, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. You are mine." There it is again. *Don't be afraid*. In fact, "Fear not" or "Don't be afraid" are the most repeated phrases in Scripture. Our Maker is trying to make a point. Life has seasons, including painful ones. Even so, fear not.

Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour."

This is the passage I'm now working on. Remembering. Listening to. Trying to, anyway, even when in cold weather I miss my outdoor perch.

Families with adopted children know that spirit of dependence and gratitude. One of my children is adopted. The youngest, she's becoming a young woman now. My wife and I met her during our years in Uganda where we created and grew the charitable organization Save the Mothers. Hannah joined us at age three. Thereafter it was three children who'd fly with us, Mum and Dad, back and forth to that East African nation for many years.

And what did young Hannah say when asked what her favourite gift was on her first Christmas with us? "Mommy, Daddy, brother, sister."

The children especially enjoyed flying. And, you know, when you fly you relax. You sit in your seat. You let the plane do the work. It has the capacity, indeed the purpose, to get where you need to go. You don't tell the captain your credentials and flap your arms.

Likewise, as I sat in my daybreak perch one morning with my reading, I was reminded. A child up for adoption doesn't

I don't know how this squares with the Almighty's power. I mean, what if some hopelessly ignorant and blind cow in Bethlehem had accidentally stepped on the Christ child? It seems to me the first Christmas was more earthy and unpredictable than we commonly picture. We can't overstate the divine element, but often understate the human.

Mary, during that first Christmas, listened. She listened as waters passed over. And as she walked through searing flames. Imagine her fears. Jewish society didn't look kindly at unmarried women who were pregnant. Mary, who was likely just a teenager, could have stood under a hail of stones thrown by angry men.

And what did Mary say? "Here I am. Let it be to me as you say."

Her words are strikingly incarnational. In this I think it's the artists of the world, not the theologians, who have a leg up in helping the rest of us understand these truths. Because it's the artists who say, "Here I am. I'm waiting for your creative spirit. I'm open. I'm expectant. Please, now, come. Fill me. Enflesh this seed of an idea." Then the artist, at least the good ones, set out to make something worthwhile with both light and shadow.

They work on something authentic, written in blood, so to speak. Because just like good art isn't made with only light, neither is a good life. Not yours or mine. We need both light and darkness. Indeed both will come to us. There will be Light in the darkness. This is why van Gogh, who knew something about it all – light and shadow, and certainly art – said, "Christ is more an artist than the artists. He works in the living spirit and the living flesh. He makes men instead of statues."

It's distractions like an overhustled Christmas season that keep us from knowing this more fully, keep us from even an earthly measure of healing and wellness. Because distracted people distract other people. Or, as T. S. Eliot put it, "We're distracted from distraction by distraction." That was almost 90 years ago. Imagine what Eliot would say about today's Christmas, never mind a smartphone.



The reassuring voice, in Isaiah's 43rd chapter, continues. "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you. And through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you. When you walk through fire, you shall not be burned. And the flame shall not consume you. For I am the

say to Mum or Dad, "You know, if you choose me, I'll supply my food. And clothes. I'll also cover my schooling." That would miss the point of it all, of being needy. Even God, in the mystery of the Incarnation, had to learn this, how to be helpless and dependant.


These cold mornings I don't sit outside, but in a chair downstairs where we have some African art. Rather than an old, gnarly willow tree, nearby I see, on a window sill, a simple nativity scene from Uganda, lovingly carved. Naturally, the art reflects life and motifs from that part of the world. Mary and Joseph have faces that show endurance and patience as much as anything. The Christmas characters look African, not like they're from some Hallmark card.


It's a reminder that while Christianity is declining in North America and Europe, it's very much on the move elsewhere, certainly in Africa. In 1900 the continent had about 10 million believers. Now? Incredibly about 600 million. They're among about 2.4 billion Christians celebrating Christmas worldwide.

That's somewhat reassuring. We're all in it together, in the thick of it, life. All of us on this little ball that's somehow spin-

ning in space. But it's also good and necessary to get alone, by a tree, or in a closet – I often write in one particular closet that's big enough – where you can be more still. And weak. Because over the centuries Jesus' followers have always helped their communities best from a place of weakness, not power.

This is the message that's been clanging for some 2,000 years now, over time and

space, even over our mistakes (especially over our mistakes), like some old, gothic church bell. "Don't be afraid. I'm with you. I'm on your side." This is what it says. It rings clear for those who have ears to hear. "Don't be afraid. Don't be afraid. Don't be afraid." 

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