

I CHILD

Good morning! **Allow some discussion on the following questions:** Have any of you ever been afraid? *(response)* What are you afraid of? *(response)* You know what I am afraid of? I am afraid of **name something you are afraid of**. What do you do when you are afraid? *(response)* What about at night when you go to sleep and you're in bed and you hear noises outside and in the house? Do you get scared then? *(response)* What do you do? *(response)* It's O.K. to be scared but there is a way to get over your fears. I want to tell you what to do at night when you're scared but first let me tell you a little story.

Does everyone remember Joseph and Mary? *(response)* Who are they? *(response)* That's right they are Jesus' mom and dad. Well, after Jesus was born everything was so wonderful but then something happened that scared Joseph and Mary. They heard that the King Herod wanted to hurt the baby Jesus, in fact King Herod wanted the baby Jesus to die. **Use your own judgment on how this information should be expressed.** So he sent a bunch of soldiers out to get Jesus. Would you be scared if you knew someone was trying to take your baby? *(response)* Well, Joseph was told in a dream to run away. So he took Mary and the baby Jesus and they ran far away. A couple of years went by and they came back home. King Herod was dead and everything was OK. So you see it's O.K. to be scared but we always have to come back and look around and make sure everything is safe. Joseph ran away from danger but he eventually came back to the place he had run from.

That's what I want you to do. Next time you are in bed and you hear noises under your bed or in the closet I want you to get up and look under the bed and go over and look in the closet. I promise there won't be any monsters under your bed and there won't be any creatures in the closet. It's OK to be afraid but don't be scared all the time. Get up look around and make sure everything is safe, then you will be able to go to sleep.

ADULT

If you've ever felt like your life was out of control, then you can relate to the harrowing adventure of Tattoo, a basset hound from Tacoma, Washington. One evening, Tattoo's owner headed out for a drive. He didn't notice that Tattoo's leash had gotten caught in the car door. Police officer Terry Filbert, patrolling the neighborhood on his motorcycle, spotted the poor dog running--and occasionally rolling--alongside the car. The officer stopped Tattoo's owner and alerted him to the situation. Tattoo came out all right, but he hasn't been begging for any walks for a while. He's kind of content to stay at home. (1)

You may feel like Tattoo after the last few weeks. This is always such a busy time of the year. But now Christmas has passed. The presents have been opened. The wrapping paper has been discarded. Now it's time for us to kick off our running shoes and relax. Groups have come in to visit and provide entertainment since Thanksgiving, so many and now you are left to next year.

Unfortunately, it wasn't that easy for Mary and Joseph. After the shepherds had gone back to their flocks and the wise men had gone back to the east, Mary and Joseph had to flee for their lives and the life of their newborn son. After following the star into the region of Judea, the magi were uncertain of their ultimate destination, so they had consulted with King Herod, seeking the birthplace of the newborn king. Herod was immediately alarmed that a child had been born who would one day be king. Herod was not going to give up his throne without a fight.

You need to know that Herod was a thoroughly evil and violent man. He was married to ten women. He had fifteen children. Ten of them were boys. As his ten sons grew up and became men, they were destined to become king. Herod did not trust his sons and he accused two of them of treason. In the year 7 B.C., these two sons were sent back to Rome, put on trial, and assassinated. In 4 B.C., Herod also killed his oldest son.

No wonder that Caesar Augustus said of Herod: "It is better to be Herod's pig than Herod's son." The quotation is a play on words. In Greek, which cultivated Romans spoke at the time, the word for pig (hys) and son (hyios) sound alike. "It is better to be Herod's hys than Herod's hyios."

You may remember that on the day Herod died, he arranged for a large number of people to be rounded up in Jerusalem and executed on that day as well. He knew that there would not be any mourners for him, so he arranged numerous executions in Jerusalem at the time of his death so there would be mourners all around.

That's the kind of man Herod was. So it is perfectly plausible that after he discovered that the wise men were not returning to give him directions to the newborn king's birthplace, Herod would give orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under. That is perfectly consistent with his character. As writer Frederick Buechner so beautifully put it, "For all his enormous power, he knew there was somebody in diapers more powerful still."

The scriptures are realistic about the human condition. There are evil people in this world. We would rather that this story of the slaughter of the innocents were not in the Christmas story. But it is, because that is the kind of world we inhabit.

Some of you remember the classic television show M*A*S*H. M*A*S*H portrayed a group of Army medics and their battalion dealing with the heart-breaking challenges of the Korean War, which we really know was about Viet Nam. In one episode, the battalion is all set to celebrate Christmas when they receive a new patient, a severely injured soldier. The doctors' deepest fear comes true; the soldier dies on the operating table.

Although it goes against his medical ethics, one doctor writes the incorrect time of death in the medical records. This allows them to tell the soldier's wife and children that he died on December twenty-sixth. The doctor justifies his actions by saying, "No child should have to connect Christmas to death." (2)

Every parent would nod in agreement with that statement. "No child should have to connect Christmas to death." But it is connected with Christmas.

David E. Cobb's son Jackson loves to hear bedtime stories. One evening, Cobb was telling his son the Christmas story of baby Jesus' birth. He always told Jackson the G-rated version from the book of Luke. It is full of drama and lovely imagery, but it leaves out Herod's murderous rampage through Bethlehem.

But Cobb forgot that his son had heard the other Christmas story last year at church--the story from the book of Matthew that set Jesus' birth within an historical context of injustice and bloodshed. Cobb forgot that his young son had asked all sorts of uncomfortable questions after the service, questions that he and his wife struggled to answer.

So as he tucked Jackson in that night, Cobb began telling the Christmas story, and then he got to the part about the magi leaving gifts, and he said, "The end." And little Jackson piped up, "What about the babies?"

"What babies?" his dad asked.

"The babies who died, like when Moses was born."

Jackson remembered. He remembered that the Christmas story is not only about miracles and angels and answered prayers. It is also about injustice, the abuse of power, and the shocking sacrifice of the incarnation. (3)

It's not the kind of thing a child ought to think about. But we live in that kind of world.

A certain church had just completed their annual Christmas pageant. There had been Scripture readings, and hymns, and candle light, and decorations. It was beautiful and reverent and joyful. Everyone was enjoying that warm and worshipful attitude that we often refer to as the “Christmas spirit.” The pastor was just reciting his Dismissal when he felt a little hand patting his leg. Seven-year-old Billy, who had played King Herod in the Christmas pageant, wanted to say something. Amused, the pastor handed the microphone to Billy. Billy stared at the congregation and announced loudly, “I am King Herod, and I have been watching you. I am going to kill all your babies.”

An uncomfortable murmur spread through the congregation. Billy’s declaration put a serious damper on the “Christmas spirit” that everyone had been feeling moments ago. The members of the congregation wanted to go home feeling good. Instead, Billy had given them something profound to think about. (4)

We live such sheltered lives. We cannot even imagine the way many people live in places like the Gaza Strip and in the Sudan and in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria and some of us have seen it first hand. Some of us remember Korea and Viet Nam and how those people were forced to live. These people see Herod all around them. The 9-11 terrorist attacks brought it home to us for a while, but for the most part, we as individuals were unscathed. The scriptures are realistic about the human condition.

The scriptures remind us, though, that evil never has the last word. Mary and Joseph are forced to flee, but they know it is only for a time. The promises of God concerning their Son are sure. God will never forsake them.

Some of you may be familiar with a speech that Martin Luther King, Jr. gave in Montgomery, AL on the 25th of March, 1965. The speech is copyrighted by Dr. King’s family, so I can’t give you the complete text. It is a pity because it would lift your spirits like it lifted the spirits of those who first heard it.

In the speech, Dr. King asks how long will it be until the hopes of his people would be realized. “How long will justice be crucified, and truth bear it?” he asks. “I come to say to you this afternoon, however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, because ‘truth crushed to earth will rise again.’”

If you were to read the speech on the Internet, you could see the responses of his audience (Speak! All right! How Long?) encouraging the preacher to “preach it.” [If any of you would like to throw in an “Amen” or at least a “Help him Jesus!” that would be fine.] Dr. King asked,

How long? Not long, because “no lie can live forever.”
How long? Not long, because “you shall reap what you sow.”
How long? Not long:

Truth forever on the scaffold,
Wrong forever on the throne,
Yet that scaffold sways the future,
And, behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadow,
Keeping watch above his own.

How long? Not long,
because the arc of the moral universe is long,
but it bends toward justice.

How long? Not long, because:
Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;

He has loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword;
His truth is marching on.
He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat;
He is sifting out the hearts of men before His judgment seat.
O, be swift, my soul, to answer Him! Be jubilant my feet!
Our God is marching on.
Glory, hallelujah! Glory, hallelujah!
Glory, hallelujah! Glory, hallelujah!
His truth is marching on.

And that is the glorious testimony of Scripture. Evil shall not have the last word. His truth is marching on.

The scriptures tell us that even in a world filled with demons we can have an abundant life. The story of Herod and the slaughter of the innocents is a horrible story, but it is not without a redeeming message. In the midst of this horror came forth our Savior. Evil did not defeat God's purposes. Nor shall it ever.

The Christmas season was especially hard for Frank Hinnant. Many years ago, Frank's eighteen-month-old son, David, had died. Christmas was such a special time for children, so it always brought back painful memories of the Hinnant's loss.

One December morning on his way to work, Frank passed by a nativity scene in a department store window. He tried not to notice the shining smiles on Mary's and Joseph's faces as they gazed down at baby Jesus. Next, Frank passed the Holy Innocents orphanage. Frank started thinking. Holy Innocents--wasn't that the title given to all the babies who were murdered by King Herod's men around the time of Jesus' birth?

Suddenly, Frank realized that the Christmas story doesn't end with the words "And they lived happily ever after." It is a story of death and the lust for power and unjust social systems and innocence sacrificed. Frank visited the orphanage that afternoon, and it changed his life.

He described to his wife a dreary place full of sad children who were desperate for attention from a caring adult. That day, Frank donated a large amount of money to the Holy Innocents orphanage, and the directors planned to build on a new wing and name it in honor of David Hinnant, Frank's deceased son. Frank's wife marveled at the change in her husband. It was the first time in 22 years that he had mentioned his son's name. (5)

Life is hard. The story of Herod is a stark reminder of that truth. This is a scary world in many ways. But evil does not have the last word.

Dr. Karen Westerfeld Tucker reminds us of that truth. She tells about an especially meaningful Christmas pageant that took place at her church. It began as a traditional pageant, with children dressed as shepherds and angels and donkeys and such. The congregation sang hymns. Miniature versions of Mary and Joseph walked solemnly up the aisle and knelt by the manger. But then something totally unexpected happened. Little Mary pulled back the blanket swaddling her baby Jesus to reveal that it was really a wooden cross. She lifted up that cross and held it over the manger, reminding the whole congregation of the real meaning of Christmas. (6)

The babe was born to die. This can be a cruel world. But beyond the cross is the empty tomb. And after the slaughter of the innocents, Mary and Joseph, and their son Jesus returned to Nazareth to build new lives-- lives that would change human existence as we know it. Yes, there are Herods in this world. But they cannot defeat God. How long? Not long, because "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

1. Ortberg, John, *The Life You've Always Wanted* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), pp. 77-82).
2. Scott Hoezee, <http://www.calvincrc.org/sermons/2005/matt2Innocents.html>.
3. David E. Cobb, http://www.cccrichardson.org/sermons/b_epiphany.htm.
4. Mark Dunn, <http://www.pilgrimuca.org.au/Sermon%2025%20Dec%202002.htm>.
5. Dina Donohue, "When Christmas Came Again," *The Guideposts Christmas Treasury*, Guideposts, Carmel, New York, 1972, pp. 42-44. Cited by Pastor David Layman, <http://www.firstpresbyterianrichmondindiana.com/sermon010806.htm>.
6. Pulpit Resource, December 27, 1998.

II

[SIR 3:2-6, 12-14](#)
[PS 128:1-2, 3, 4-5](#)
[COL 3:12-21](#)

Yes, if you check your books, you will notice that there was a selection choice for the second reading. I am the one who chose the one we used because of the line that the other leaves out and that is "Wives, be subordinate to your husbands, as is proper in the Lord." St Paul is saying this to women who did not choose their husbands – marriages were arranged. The husbands who did the choosing were told, Husbands, love your wives. They should as it says in Ephesians love their wives as much as they love their own body and as much as Christ loved the Church – He loved enough to die. A husband has to love his wife enough to die for her. She is not instructed to love, not to die for her husband to do obey to keep the peace.

Monday is the New Year, and I can feel the anticipation--or dread, depending on your point of view--growing. I heard one guy say he already dreads the new year. He said, "The holidays aren't quite over and already I'm about 90 days ahead on my calories and 90 days behind on my bills." Some of you can identify with him. Our calendar did not come down from above. It was established by human minds. There is no real reason why one day on the calendar should bear more significance than any other day of the year. Yet still we invest the changing of the year with a great deal of meaning. It is a time of hope, of planning, of vision-casting, to use a business buzzword. And, of course, it is a time for resolutions. Ready or not, it is time to set yourself on a course of self-improvement.

I like a list of resolutions called the 7-UPS FOR THE NEW YEAR. No, this has nothing to do with the soft drink. These 7-UPS fall under the heading of attitudes and actions.

The first is WAKE UP--Begin the day with the Lord. It is His day. Rejoice in it.

The second is DRESS-UP--Put on a smile. It improves your looks. It says something about your attitude.

The third is SHUT-UP--Watch your tongue. Don't gossip or curse. Say nice things. Learn to listen.

The fourth is STAND-UP--Take a stand for what you believe. Resist evil. Do good.

Five, LOOK-UP--Open your eyes to the Lord. After all, He is your only Savior.

Six, REACH-UP--Spend time in prayer with your adorations, confessions, thanksgivings and supplications to the Lord.

And finally, LIFT-UP--Be available to help those in need--serving, supporting, and sharing. (1)

If you're going to make new year's resolutions this year, let me suggest these.

If you fail to live up to your resolution in the first couple of days. Fine you just have to accomplish it by the end of the year.

Why do we bother to make New Year's resolutions in the first place? Why do we feel this need each January 1 to set new goals? Maybe it is because resolutions help us to identify our priorities. They answer the Question: how do I want to invest my time, energy, money, and talents in this new year? The new year reminds us that time is passing. It is up to each of us to maximize the potential of every moment.

Someone wrote some thought-provoking words on the meaning of time: To realize the value of "one month"

ask a mother who gave birth to a premature baby. To realize the value of "one week" ask the editor of a weekly newspaper. To realize the value of "one hour," ask the lovers who are waiting to meet. To realize the value of "one minute," ask the person who missed the train. To realize the value of "one second," ask the person who just avoided an accident. To realize the value of "one millisecond," ask the person who won a silver medal in the Olympics. (2)

.The coming of the new year forces us to face the question: what will be my priorities this year?

That's a question that Simeon, the central figure in today's Bible passage, didn't have to ask himself. His New Year's resolution was the same every year: to wait for the Messiah.: "A zealous person in religion," "is pre-eminently a person of one thing . . . They see only one thing, they care for one thing, they live for one thing and that one thing is to please God. Whether we live, or whether we die--whether we have health or whether we have sickness--whether rich or whether poor . . . for all this the zealous person cares nothing at all.

"they live for one thing; and that one thing is to please God, and to advance God's glory. If they are consumed in the very burning, they care not for it—they are content. They are bit like a lamp, made to burn; and if consumed in burning, they but done the work for which God appointed him." (3)

Simeon lived for one thing. This was his passion--to greet the coming Messiah.

In the Hollywood movie, THE TIN CUP, golf pro Roy McAvoy calls it "the defining moment." McAvoy, played by actor Kevin Costner is a happy-go-lucky, underachieving golf pro who finds himself miraculously playing in the U.S. Open. Tied for the lead on the final day of the tournament, he faces a critical decision on a very difficult shot on the last hole: take a big risk, go for the green, and win, or play it safe, make par, and force a playoff.

Risk it all or play it safe?

This is a defining event for Roy. In fact, Roy uses his favorite expression to sum up his situation: "Define the moment or the moment defines you."

Roy is a risk-taker. He always has been; probably he always will be. Sometimes he has won; sometimes he has lost--sometimes badly. But he spurns the idea of playing it safe. And this time is no exception--he goes for the green. (4) This is who he is. He can do no other and be true to himself.

Simeon was zealous for only one thing. Only one purpose in life. Only one focus in prayer. His first thought upon rising and his last thought upon lying down was, when will I see God?

In the book of Jeremiah, chapter 29, the Lord tells His people, "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart." (Jeremiah 29: 13) And many centuries later Jesus would echo this sentiment when he said, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." (Matthew 5: 6 and 8)

Our Bible passage tells us that Simeon was a man with a pure heart. He had been blessed with a special assurance from the Holy Spirit: that he would not die before he had seen the coming Messiah.

Many older people face the future with anxiety. They may fear a future of failing health, shrinking finances, social isolation. Some people reach their senior years only to face a void of meaninglessness. Their self-imposed goals have been met. Their socially-ascribed roles no longer fit. Their life dwindles down to a period of anxious waiting.

This was not the case with Simeon. Because of the Holy Spirit's promise to him, he could face the future with hope and joy.

Composer Oscar Hammerstein once claimed, "I just can't write anything without hope in it." Remember these lyrics from the musical Oklahoma!: "Oh, what a beautiful morning, Oh, what a beautiful day! I've got a glorious feeling. Everything's going my way." In his show South Pacific, one of the songs contains these words: "I'm stuck like a dope/ With a thing called hope, And I can't get it out of my heart."

I think that was Simeon's theme song: "I'm stuck like a dope with a thing called hope, and I can't get it out of my heart." Hope for what? Hope that he would see the Lord's power and glory and mercy in the flesh. Hope that he would see God's ultimate plan for His chosen people.

And thus the stage is set for Simeon's defining moment. He is in the courtyard of the Temple and he spies a humble young couple. There was nothing distinguishing about this couple--except for the squirming baby in their arms. There is nothing about the baby that we know of that distinguished it from other babies, but somehow old Simeon knows this is the one he has been awaiting. He walks up to the poor couple, takes their squirming baby boy from their arms, and announces that he has finally seen the Christ.

Listen to Simeon's declaration: "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen Your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and glory to your people Israel . . ."

"You may now dismiss your servant in peace . . ." Have you ever thought about what Simeon's life was like after he saw Jesus? The Bible doesn't give us any details. For all we know, Simeon may have died a happy man that very afternoon. Or he may have lived for a few more years. What was his life like after that? He had

seen the Lord's promise of salvation. He had found perfect peace. There was certainly no more anxiety in Simeon's future. He had seen Jesus.

As John Donne so perfectly put it: "I shall not live till I see God. And when I have seen Him, I shall never die."
(5)

There is a Hebrew word for the emotion Simeon felt on that day. According to Pastor Lloyd John Ogilvie, the Hebrew word SHALOM carries both the meaning of peace and of salvation. (6)

In a tiny baby, Jesus, Simeon found shalom. His life was complete. An encounter with Jesus will do that. And here's the Good News: you and I can have the shalom that changed Simeon's life 2,000 years ago. You and I can also find peace and salvation.

"Sovereign Lord," prayed Simeon, "as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen Your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and glory to your people Israel . . ."

Do you want to face the New Year with Shalom--peace and salvation? Before we leave the Christmas season behind, you are invited to look into the face of the Christ Child one last time and to see there your hope for this year and every year. May this be your defining moment--when you experience the coming of the Lord.

1The Joyful Noiseletter, 1-2002, p. 5. Contributed by Dr. John Bardsley.

2. As told by Mark L. Feldman and Michael F. Spratt in Five Frogs on a Log (New York: HarperBusiness, 1999).

3. Found on the Internet. Author unknown.

4. J. C. Ryrie in Practical Religion.

5. Cited in John Andrew, Nothing Cheap (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), p. 91.

6. "Perfect Peace" by Lloyd John Ogilvie, Preaching, Jan./Feb. 2002, p. 25.

7. "Meeting in a Snowbank" by Tom C. Rakow, Decision, January 1997, p. 15.