

“Do not be afraid...” (Luke 2:10)



Christmas is God Lighting Candle in the Darkness of our World

We've got plenty of situations and incidences to be afraid of here in South Sudan, and yet the Bible is categorical in commanding us not to fear? Doesn't God know already that we face dangers and possible death daily? Ironically, some of the best-known Bible verses deal with fear. *“Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go,”* it says in the book of Joshua (1:9).

God says through the prophet Isaiah, *“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine”* (Isa. 43:1). Jesus said to his disciples, *“Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid”* (John 14:27). There's also plenty said about worry and anxiety. *“So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself”* (Matthew 6:34).

It is about 110 times, the biblical commands us not to be afraid. *“Do not be afraid,”* God says to Abraham on several occasions. “Do not be afraid,” God says to the Israelites through Moses. *“Do not be afraid,”* the angel says to Mary and Joseph when they received the news. But have we ever reflected deeply on how unrealistic this can sound in a country like South Sudan? Isn't there plenty for people to be afraid of? Isn't some fear justified? It strikes me that when the biblical characters were told not to be afraid, and they actually had every reason to be.

Friends, when you are told to leave your homeland without a clear destination (as Abraham was) is not without fears and concerns! Confronting a powerful ruler before wandering through the desert (as Moses did) doesn't sound like driving on a highway for some of us! Facing tough decisions and public scrutiny as future parents of the Messiah (like with Mary and Joseph) is enough to raise anyone's heart rate.

Furthermore, the command not to fear doesn't seem to make any sense if it simply rests on some kind of assured outcome or protection, because the people here in South Sudan have none of it! Although I am convinced that many believers rely on an internal assurance that God will always heal them and their loved ones or protect them from impending dangers, this flies in the face of reality for us here in South Sudan, where tragedies seem to strike anytime and anywhere without any warning.

As a Pastor among South Sudanese communities, for many years, both here and in the diaspora, I've seen many faithful people in our church who succumb to all kinds of illnesses. I've seen families of deep faith, but who have to bury their loved one as a result of wars and COVID-19. I've seen people praise God for delivering them from obvious dangers, but are still not able to find their ways to any credible justice system. Although it's true that fear is sometimes blown out of proportion by some international media, the objects of our fears can be real.

Today, the names of our fears here in South Sudan are many and varied such as the 'ethnic profiling' or COVID-19, hunger, flooding and so on. Given all of this, the Scripture so categorical that we avoid fear? Where we are surrounded with fearful situations and where physical and emotional protection is not guaranteed, how do we make sense of this, particularly for the people of South Sudan, who have gone through such fears for decades now? Fear has the power to disintegrate our lives and our communities.

Therefore, point is not what we fear, but what a life ruled by fear does to us. Fear can destroy us much more quickly and completely than the object of fear themselves. Fear has led many of our people now living perpetually in the internally displaced camps (IDPs) and refugee camps. Fear has made us target and profile people in terms of their ethnic identity and made our government abandon our constitutional principles, resorting to torture and arrest without charge.

And although fear is a natural human response to threats, it has an incredible power to make us behave badly and only worry about ourselves. Fear is disastrous to our well-being, in all senses. The more insecure we feel, the meaner we become. *"Love your neighbour"* is the Bible's central command, one that is repeated several times in the New Testament to summarize God's law. But we cannot love the neighbour or the ethnic group we fear, because fear intercepts every necessary precondition for showing love to someone else.

In 2 Timothy 1:7, we are told, *"God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind."* Notice that power, love and sound mind are placed in opposition to fear. They cannot coexist. 1 John 4:18 says, *"There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear."* Obviously, we're not talking here about clinical anxiety. That is altogether different from the emotional and spiritual ailment plaguing our society in which we make decisions, form priorities and react to others from a persistent perception of threat.

Interestingly, some of the least fearful and most faith-filled people are those who have stared death in the face. There are myriads of testimonies among refugee families that literally ran for their lives, separated from their children, bleeding and wounded, having seen other loved ones killed. I think of others to whom I've ministered to who have faced health crises and endured suffering.

These have been people in my life who, in a way that is hard to describe, have allowed *"perfect love drive out fear"* in their lives! In the face of real threats to our communities, we must be vigilant, informed and of "sound mind," as II Timothy reminds us. It is in the face of all these that the message of Christmas comes to us and to the rest of the world. So, what is the message of Christmas to a community such as South Sudanese, where fear and anxieties are part of their daily

diet? Christmas to us is God lighting a candle in the darkness our world and our country to be more specific. Its light sends out a sign of life, hope and consolation in these difficult times of insecurity through wars, ethnic profiling and the Corona Pandemic.

More than ever before, we are learning the importance of hope and solidarity, one with another. The Christmas candle reminds us that, we too, should send out light to one another, by supporting each other, by bridging distances, and by travelling new unfamiliar paths together. Perhaps, this year, of all the years, we may experience the Christmas' mystery anew: how God himself comes into the darkness of our world, to give us courage and hope. "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light.

During the First World War, Christmas came to a Russian war prison camp in Siberia. Until that time, it was the scene of homesickness, misery, hatred, and despair. Suicide was a frequent and common place. But when the prisoners and their guards gathered in the half-underground barracks for the Christmas celebration, the leader arose to say, "There is one song all can sing tonight, "Silent Night, Holy Night." They sang it, both the guards and the prisoners, each man in his own language. When they had finished, the Russian commander's eyes, filled with tears as he told the captives, "Tonight is the first time in more than a year that I have been able to forget that you and I are supposed to be enemies." What a tremendous testimony!

"For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given and the government shall be upon his should", declares Isaiah (9:26]. When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." We thank God for allowing us to be guided by his light, as we continue to share our journey together, both here in South Sudan and wherever you might be. I wish each of you a blessed Christmas and a safe and healthy New Year, 2021.

*Rev. Dr Bernard Suwa
For Mission 21*