

***“A Peek at the Promise”***

A man took his film to a one-hour development facility in downtown Chicago. He left the film and returned in an hour to discover that the place had changed to a one-hour cleaners. The confused man hesitantly entered the store, met the same clerk, and asked about his film. The gentleman behind the counter said, *“Was that a suit or just shirts?”* The man replied, *“It was 35 millimeter film.”* The clerk asked, *“Was it to be pressed or just cleaned?”* The man said, *“It was film to be developed.”* The clerk said, *“Do you want to look through these suits to see if one of them belongs to you.”* The man, getting a little agitated by now, said with a bit of tension in his voice, *“I didn't HAVE a suit, I HAD film.”* The clerk asked the gentleman if he ever watched TV. He said, *“Sometimes.”* Then the clerk announced, *“Smile, you're on Candid Camera!”* This happened more than fifty years ago.

I tend to think that must be how Mary and Joseph felt! Except that the Bible gives us a clue to how Joseph felt. In his dream God spoke to him: ***“Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife . . .”***

In a book entitled Doorways to a Deeper Faith, author Alan Kent Scholes writes that he has heard many sermons that identified pride as THE “root sin.” (Paul tells us ***“The love of money is the root of all evil”*** [1 Timothy 6:10], but that may not be the same thing as “root sin.”) Scholes winds up saying that, for him, the root sin is fear. I don't know if it is THE root sin; but it certainly is the first and a very strong reaction to sin (recall, Adam and Eve hid in the Garden because they were afraid [Genesis 3]).

It begs the question: Of what are you afraid? I recently watch a rerun of “Monk” in which he is buried inside a coffin. I must confess: that is one of my irrational fears — being buried alive (why that scares me I do not know). Are you afraid of growing old (I know, some of you are with me thinking, *“Too late to worry about that!”*)? Many people fear becoming incapacitated in some way, or more precisely they fear being

incapacitated to the point that they become a burden to family or friends.

Are you afraid of heights? On a trip to Chicago some years ago Kristine and I went up into what used to be called the Sears Tower (now known as the Willis Tower). They have built these glass-enclosed bump-outs that extend beyond the walls 110 stories up, so that you can step out and stand like you're floating in mid-air. (Notice, I said that YOU can stand like your floating in mid-air; I wouldn't get within ten feet of them.)

Afraid of spiders . . . snakes . . . insects of any kind? (You would be, especially if you react none too positively to say, a bee sting!) Many, maybe most, people would place high on their list of fears what I am doing right now — public speaking. And, of course, there is The Big One: death.

What causes those fears? Why am I afraid of this and you're not; why I am not at all bothered by that and it just makes you want to run from the room screaming? I heard a story about a woman who has no fear; it's because that part of her brain that would trigger a fear response — the amygdala — had been damaged by disease, so she had virtually no fear-based reactions [scientists have been studying her for about 45 years and think her situation may lead to treatments for conditions like PTSD and paranoia].

What caused Joseph to be afraid to take Mary as his wife? I, for one, could certainly can understand why he might be *angry* (she's pregnant; he knows it's not from him!) I can see where he might be *confused*! Why was he afraid? I suspect it's the unknown. He doesn't know where this has come from and he doesn't know where this is going.

Not all fear is of the unknown. Your fear of bee stings may be based on an intimately known history of reactions. You may fear public speaking will lead to ridicule — what others will think if I get up to speak? — because that happened to you (maybe more than once). But fear usually comes because we lack control.

That, I think, is the root sin: the desire to be in control. The serpent told

Eve that the fruit on the tree was forbidden because it would make them **“like God”** [Genesis 3:4]. What is being “like God” if it is not being in control. Every time we think that we must be in control we seek to wrest that control away from God. Joseph is feeling a wee bit out of control . . . out of his element.

Often that is true for us, as well. When you lose control of your car on an icy road, that’s scary. The very first week that we had moved from Euclid to Macedonia, at 2:00 AM on a snowy Sunday morning, seeking to avoid Ledge Road’s infamous hill, I opted to go down the less-steep Shepard Road to Route 82. On the last thirty-degree incline at the foot of Shepard Road, my car spun around, and I was heading towards Route 82 backwards, anticipating that there was a semi heading west on 82 and that I would fly into that intersection just in time for him not to be able to stop. By the grace of God, I came to a complete stop right at the end of Shepard Road — no semi passed by — shaken, I continued on to church.

Any time we sense that loss of control, we often get angry, or frightened, or anxious, when what we should do is what I did that morning — pray.

But prayer, as it is so often misunderstood, is not seeking to control God. How could you control God? If you were Mary or Joseph, how could you gain control over a miraculous conception? If you were Joseph, how do you let go of your feeling of disappointment when your fiancé tells you she’s with child? How do you find control in any situation? You don’t . . . and that’s what makes us afraid.

We want to control our environment, but we find that we can do so only haphazardly. We want to control our children, only to discover they have minds all their own. Many a Pastor wants to control his congregation, only to discover that those sheep have teeth. We want to control our destinies, and we cannot. There are times, believe it or not, when I cannot even control my own temper.

Joseph is told, **“Do not be afraid . . . 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.***" Fear is turned away when we understand that the Holy Spirit is in control. That is an act of faith . . . and it means that we not only recognize His control, but yield to it.

God has taken care of whatever may cause us fear by providing us the salvation Christ came to bring. He is to be named ***"Immanuel"*** — ***"God with us."*** If we know nothing else about the message of salvation, this is enough to comfort us: God draws alongside us. But we know a lot more than that: this God who draws alongside us comes with forgiveness: ***"he will save his people from their sins."***

In his dream Joseph is given a peek at the promise to us all: the birth of a son. This Saturday and next Sunday, we have the opportunity to rejoice with everything we are and have in the arrival of that promise. Our celebration will get corrupted with red-suited elves and bad made-for-TV movies about mothers becoming angels and self-centered slobs being given one more chance to "get Christmas right." Some will imbue the eve of Christmas with a kind of supernatural aura that says the day itself has a kind of magic at work (*"For we need a little music / Need a little laughter / Need a little singing / Ringing through the rafter / And we need a little snappy / 'Happy ever after' / Need a little Christmas now"*)

But we will know what the promise really is: it's the kid! It's not "the children" — it's the Child. It's not all the presents — it's the Gift. It's not all the songs, like "Jingle Bells" or "Frosty the Snowman" — but the song of the angels proclaiming ***"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill to men."***

Because today we sit with Joseph in the midst of our fears and get to see a peek at the promise: To us the voice of God clearly says: ***" . . . do not be afraid [because it] is from the Holy Spirit . . . Jesus . . . will save his people from their sins.' . . . 'The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel'" — which means, "God is with us.""***

But there is one last thing we need to make sure we hear with this peek at the promise: ***“When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the LORD had commanded him . . .”*** So likewise must we listen for God’s message — brought to us by angels, or apostles, or evangelists, by a whisper on the wind, or (who knows?) maybe even by a preacher — we listen for the voice of God spoken into our hearts and, having heard, eagerly, readily, obediently do what God commands.

Amen.