CHRISTMAS EVE, 1987

"DO NOT BE AFRAID"

John 1:1-14 (Selected Verses)

Christmas can be a time of fear as well as a time of joy. Does that sound strange to you? Consider tonight how fear is connected to Christmas.

I'm not thinking of the fear that we have spent too much again this season, or the fear that we would not get everything done, or the fear that we will not receive the Christmas gifts we've been thinking about and hinted for during the past several months, or the fear that we will not be able to pay the bills when they come in January.

The fear I'm talking about is the kind of fear that was connected with the first Christmas.

Most of us do not associate fear with the beautiful story of the baby in a manger. A warm emotional glow surrounds the scene. Everything seems to be in perfect order.

Yet notice in the Christmas story as told in the New Testament accounts how frequently the angels had to calm the fears of the people.

To Zechariah, when he was told that his long-abandoned hope of being the father of a child was about to be fulfilled, the angel said, "Do not be afraid." To Mary, after Gabriel announced that God was with her: "Do not be afraid." And to the shepherds in the field, scared by the glory of God, "Do not be afraid."

Christmas might be all sweetness and light for us, but the participants in that first Christmas pageant found themselves being afraid.

What were they afraid of? Why would Mary be afraid when the angel told her that "God was with her?" Why would the shepherds be afraid of the glory of God?

Perhaps these people knew the Old Testament and especially remembered the statement, "The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom." They knew the stories of their ancestors in the faith and how they responded to an overwhelming experience of God's Holy Presence. An encounter with the Divine, according to the Biblical accounts, results in an overwhelming awe and a wrenching sense of our unworthiness.

When Abraham heard the covenantal promise of God, his face hit the ground.

When Moses saw God in the burning bush, he hid in fear. When the children of Israel

witnessed a brief fleeting revelation of God in the mountain storm, they said they had seen enough, thanks, and sent Moses to see the rest by himself.

Isaiah's vision of God made him cry out, "Woe is me."

When Peter encountered God's power in Jesus, he fell on his knees, saying, "Depart from me for I am a sinful man."

Saul met the living Christ on the Damascus Road and was knocked flat.

The individuals who were involved in that first Christmas event were afraid because they had a healthy respect for God's holiness and God's unexpected ways. They were afraid, because in that first Christmas event they were caught in that intersection where the transcendent joins the immanent, the meeting place of the human and the Divine. That which was "Totally Other" met them and they had an overwhelming experience of the presence of God. No wonder they became unglued.

It's a scary thing to meet God in a new and unexpected way. There's a mysteriousness and holiness about God that is always beyond us and yet takes hold of us. God's power uncovers our weakness. God's holiness reveals our unholiness. God exposes our selfishness.

How can we not be afraid?

But does anyone become unglued today in reference to God? Or have we tamed the terror of the Holy? Have we tried to make God too chummy, too intimate?

Sometimes we seem too eager to manage the mystery out of people's lives. Yes, we know that God has come close to us in Christ. Yes, we know that God cares for us as intimately as a loving parent. But in our eagerness to make known God's approachability, have we destroyed the astonishment over the approachability of God?

There is a fear, an awe of God, a wonderment, that is appropriate particularly at Christmas. There is the mystery that God should come to us in a baby. There is the mystery of God's love. There is the mystery of love itself--even the love between two human beings. I don't pretend to understand it. I only know that it exists.

There is the mystery that this love incarnate in the baby Jesus is not all there is to God. I like to think of the Christmas event as the love of God being focused in the baby in the manger. Remember how as children we used to take a magnifying glass to focus the energy of the sun to burn through a piece of paper.

So does the love of God focus itself in a squirming, crying baby named Jesus. So does the love of God burn into our souls.

So the fear that is associated with Christmas, says, "Beware of those who are always certain they know exactly what God's will is for all things. Beware of any claim of infallibility." The mysteriousness of God means that no set of words, no creed, no theology, not even the Bible itself can ever totally explain or contain the majesty, the mystery and the holiness of God.

Do not be afraid because you should be afraid. "To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord." Do not be afraid because this transcendent otherness understandably scares the wits out of you. This power that reveals your powerlessness and disrupts your calm securities--this God--comes as Savior.

This God we cannot control, yet God is good. Tonight we gather in wonderment and in awe around the mystery of God's incarnation. "The love of God became a human being and dwells among us, full of grace and truth." I hope we are a little bit afraid, yet not afraid. Fear not, for God is good, and we can trust God. AMEN.