Christmas Eve 1994
DO NOT BE AFRAID

Christmas can be a time of fear as well as a time of joy. I'm not thinking of the usual Christmas fears — the fear that we've spent too much again this season, or the fear that we won't get everything done, or the fear that we won't receive the Christmas gifts we've been hoping for and about which we've been dropping all kinds of hints during the past several months, or even the fear that we're going to have trouble paying all the bills in January or February.

The fear I'm thinking about tonight is the kind of fear that was connected with the first Christmas and can still be present today.

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 stories as told in the New Testament how frequently the angels sought to calm the fears of the people to whom they were sent.

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." And to Joseph, the fiancé of Mary, the angel messenger said, "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife."

The message to Mary after the angel announced that God was with her and she would bear a child was also, "Do not be afraid."

And to the shepherds in the field, overwhelmed by the glory of God, there was the calming assurance, "Do not be afraid."

There is a lot of sweetness and light in the Christmas story, 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 in fear 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 Biblical accounts, can result in an overwhelming sense of awe and a feeling of our own inadequacy. A few examples: when Abraham heard the covenantal promise of God, his face hit the ground. He was afraid.

When Moses experienced God in the burning bush, he hid in fear. When the children of Israel witnessed a brief fleeting revelation of God in a mountain storm, they said they had seen enough, thank you, and sent Moses to deal with God all by himself.

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

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

Saul, who later became Paul, met the power of God in the living Christ on the Damascus road and was knocked flat and lost his eyesight for a time.

All these examples suggest that these individuals from the past and those who were involved in that first Christmas event were afraid because they had a healthy respect for God's glory, holiness, and unexpected surprises.

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 heretofore was "totally other" met them, and they had an overwhelming experience of the presence of God. No wonder they became unglued. They were afraid, too, because when God calls you to do something in this world, it makes you wonder if you are up to the task.

It can be 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 do many people today become unglued in reference to God? Or do we believe we have 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 Jesus. Yes, we know that God cares for us as intimately as a loving parent. But in our eagerness to make known the approachability of God, have we under-emphasized the astonishment, the awe, involved in the closeness of God?

There is a fear, an awe of God, a wonderment, that is appropriate, especially at Christmas. There is the mystery that God should come to us in a baby. There is the mystery of God's unconditional love. There is the mystery of love itself — even the love among human beings, one for another. I don't pretend to understand it. I only know that it exists and is the most powerful force in creation. And because of its power, I am afraid of it at times.

There is the mystery that this love incarnate in Jesus as an infant and an adult is not all there is to God. I find it helpful to think of the Christmas event as the love of God being focused in Jesus. 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. That was not the totality of the power of the sun, but it was the sun focused in a particular place and time.

So does the love of God focus itself in a baby named Jesus, and then it continues through his life, his teachings, and his dying on the cross and in the resurrection. So does the love of God burn in our own souls.

There is an appropriate fear that is associated with Christmas. There is deep mystery here. This fear 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 mystery of God means that no set of words, no creed, no theology, not even the Bible itself can ever totally explain the majesty, the glory, the love, and the holiness of God.

There's a paradox in the words of the angels to the shepherds and others — do not be afraid because you should be afraid.

The right kind of fear means we are taking something seriously. When a bride and groom tell me right before the wedding ceremony that they are nervous and afraid, I tell them, "That's a good sign. It means you are standing in awe of the commitment you are about to make to each other. It means you are taking it seriously."

If you are nervous and afraid before you are to give a speech or make a presentation, that's a positive sign. Do not be afraid because you should be afraid. When you first discover that you are going to become the parents of a child and you are afraid, that's a good sign. Do not be afraid because you should be afraid.

And when God comes into your life and you are afraid, do not be afraid because the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. "To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord."

Do not be afraid because this all-powerful love of God is present in the world. This power that reveals your powerlessness and disrupts your calm securities — this God — comes as Savior.

This God is all-powerful, yet this 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 you are a little bit afraid tonight, yet not ultimately afraid. Fear not, for God is good, and you can trust God. Amen.