

Today, the first Sunday in Advent, we begin our Advent series, "Fear Not!" November being a month with five Sundays, the format of our service today is, Songs of Praise; Being the first Sunday in Advent, the theme of our service is "Songs of Advent Praise". The text below is a reflection on our theme, setting the stage for the next three Sundays and into Christmas and the New Year. We pray you enjoy God's comfort and encouragement as you join us at this time.

Something changed in our world, after the shooting down of the Malaysian Airline aeroplane in July this year which influenced my planning of our autumn and Advent/Christmas services. Reading the Christmas texts over and over again, I felt led to study God's use of the word "FEAR", perhaps appropriate at this time, after the events in Paris.

It is sad, during a time of year which focuses on joy and happiness, that the word FEAR should enter our vocabulary and our thoughts. Over the next four weeks we shall explore together, the significance of the word FEAR used in the Christmas story.

We the human race, fear three things: loss of life (death), denial of security (food, clothing and shelter), and the future, the unknown (what will happen tomorrow?, what will happen when I die?).

Look into the first three chapters of the book of Genesis. God creates the earth, step by step, and at the end of each step, God is delighted, He is ecstatic with the outcome. Step by step His plan is coming together. When the earth is ready to receive and sustain His crowning achievement, God creates the human being, the man and the woman. Imagine God's joy in handing over His creation to us: live here and enjoy it all. Everything. I even trust you to look after two trees I have planted, the fruit of which is not yet ripe. Don't eat it's fruit as yet; if you do, the consequence is death. If you don't, you will live and enjoy everything I have created.

One of the saddest lines in all of history is when the first man and woman cast aside God's instruction not to eat the fruits of the Tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil and the fruit of the Tree of Eternal Life, they hide from God.

As was His custom, God comes to enjoy time with the man and the woman, and finds them hiding from Him, So He calls out to them. And the man replies, "I heard the sound of your presence in the garden and I was afraid..."¹ I was thoroughly ashamed of myself. The consequence of one act of disobedience, destroyed a relationship based on pure love, and introduced shame and fear.

Since then, one phrase has echoed through human history, which is "FEAR NOT!" Sometimes it is, "Do not be afraid", on other occasions, it is "Why are you afraid?", and there are a few other translations, but the phrase "FEAR NOT", is both a command and an encouragement. When spoken by God or His direct messenger, the words "FEAR NOT!" are intended to calm and comfort us.

To the lament, "I heard the sound of your presence in the garden and I hid because I was afraid", there isn't a page in human history when God does not assure us, "Trust me, I am in control. I know what I am doing and I know the outcome. Stay with me. Trust me and I will lead you home!"

This is love, true love. It may seem like the world is falling apart, but the love of God will not fail us. FEAR NOT!

AMEN

¹ Genesis 3:10