

Once upon a time, some centuries ago, our foremothers and fathers would spend these twelve days of Christmas gathering together, sitting around a toasty fire...and telling terrifying, bone-chilling, keep-you-up-all-night ghost stories. It seems strange to us now, but in the past, Christmas was prime season for ghosts. With the days as short as they could be and the darkness stretching through a long, long night, people at Christmas spent their evening hours doing what people throughout history have always done - trying to scare the jingle bells out of each other.

All of this malarkey seemed a little too pagan for the Puritans who ended up populating the majority of our shores, so the tradition of telling Christmas ghost stories isn't nearly as prevalent in the U.S. as it is in Britain, where annual television Christmas specials often include something of the supernatural. There are two holdovers in our culture - the first, of course, being Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, with its triumvirate of helpful spirits, all introduced to Scrooge by his

partner Jacob Marley, whom we all well know was as dead as a doornail. The second is that one line in the Christmas classic *It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year*: you know the one - "There'll be parties for hosting/Marshmallows for toasting/And caroling out in the snow/There'll be scary ghost stories/And tales of the glories/of Christmases long, long ago."

That ghost story line always seemed a bit odd to me as a kid. Wasn't Halloween the time for scary stories, not Christmas? Who told scary stories when there were chestnuts roasting on an open fire? Christmas is the time for tinsel and candlelight, not shadows and cobwebs. Ghost stories at Christmas? Bah, humbug. But it turns out that I was wrong. Scary ghost stories have been a part of Christmas tradition for a long time. Seems that Christmas and scary do go together after all.

There is certainly one person in our Gospel reading this morning who is terrified at Christmas. There is a man in this story

who has been waking up in the middle of the night with his heart pounding against his breastbone and an icy sweat soaking his sheets. For he has been told that something evil is coming, that there is someone in the world who wants to snatch away that which he holds most dear. Death is at the door, raising his bony hand to knock for entry, and the only way to escape is to do something drastic, something he would never do without this trickle of fear running down his spine.

The terrified man, of course, is not Joseph, but Herod. Herod is the one who is afraid in this story; it is Herod's fear that motivates and shapes everything that happens. Herod has heard that a boy has been born who will fulfill all the prophecies that his people have clung to for generations. This boy will save his people, redeem the land, become King of the Jews. This is why Herod is waking up in the night with the sweats and the shakes. This is why Herod is looking over his shoulder and starting at shadows. Herod has seen a ghost -

a man coming to claim that which Herod loves more than anything else in the world: his power, his title, his throne.

Joseph, on the other hand, is motivated not by fear, but by love. This is not to say that there weren't moments along this flight into Egypt that Joseph's stomach didn't plunge down to his feet when he imagined Herod's troops sweeping through the streets, looking for his son, but Joseph wasn't leaving because he was being chased by a ghost. Joseph left, took Mary and Jesus hundreds of miles away from their home, because he was following, not just fleeing. Because an angel came to him in a dream and told him what to do, and because angels had always told him not to be afraid. And so Joseph left his fear behind him, gathered up all of the love in his heart, and followed the angel's words to safe ground.

I don't know if you noticed, but we've skipped around in the Christmas story a bit. When in the first sentence of today's Gospel it reads, "when the wise men had left," it means those wise men, *the*

wise men, the ones who haven't gotten here yet, the ones whose arrival we will mark tomorrow evening on the Feast of the Epiphany with a Solemn High Mass at 7:00 pm with special guest preacher Fr. Maurice Charles, current chaplain of Roosevelt Chapel and former priest of Atonement, where we'll also be blessing the chalk for blessing of your homes, which to me sounds like a wonderful liturgy that you won't want to miss. We've jumped out of order of the story today so that we can hear this last story of Jesus' childhood before we move to the story of his baptism next week. We've moved this post-Epiphany story into this season, into Christmas, and it is a right and good thing that we do. Because Christmas can handle scary stories. Christmas can hold stories of angels appearing in dreams in the dead of night with unsettling news that upends your whole life, of beings swooping out of the sky onto unsuspecting shepherds with such a frightening appearance that the first words they had to say were Fear Not, of a woman whose life was in danger because the child she bore

was not her husband's, of a man trying desperately to protect his wife from rumor and scandal and from the dangers of a long road, of a mother going into a labor in the night, in a stable, with no one to help her but a husband who had certainly not assisted with childbirth before - not to mention the stories of the ultimate result of Herod's raging fear - thousands of innocent children slaughtered for no reason but their age, their promise, and the possibility of their future.

There is much to be afraid of in these Christmas stories, but Christmas can take care of it all. Because Christmas is the season when we remember that God did not abandon her people, that God did not leave us alone in the night, in the dark, with no one to guide us home, that God chose to come among us, to walk beside us, to show us what truly fearless love looks like, to reveal what truly fearless love can do, how it can turn places of shadows into places of light and ghost stories into stories of resurrection. Christmas is the season for scary stories, because Christmas casts all our fear away.

There is much to be afraid of in the world today. A continent is burning, the seas are rising, and there is a match held terrifyingly close to the tinderbox that is the Middle East. There is hatred in the world, and death, real evil, real suffering, real darkness. But we are a Christmas people, and the ghost stories of the world hold no sway with us. We are those who have been given the gift of Joseph – words of promise and comfort that guide us along right pathways and lead us to safe ground. And even as the darkness gathers around our feet, we can choose to live as people of the light. We can choose to live as Joseph did, by following hope and not running from fear. We can choose to walk with all of the faith and love that we can hold, rather than flinging ourselves, like Herod, from one desperate solution to the next. We can continue to move forward with open and compassionate hearts instead of collapsing in the path and waiting for the vultures to come. We can listen to the angels, and not fear.

The world has enough ghost stories. We have the story that

can answer them all – that unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, Almighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. We can, and we must, live in the light of this truth, without fear and with great courage, transforming those places of darkness and death into places of hope and love. We must honor Christmas in our hearts and try to keep it all the year, so that we may sponge away the writing on the wall. For Christ is born, and we have nothing to fear. May Heaven and Christmas Time be praised, and may God bless us, every one.

*Preached by Mother Erika Takacs*

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*Church of the Atonement, Chicago*

*(with thanks to Charles Dickens)*