

Joyful and afraid (Luke 2:1–20)

Can we recognize Jesus' coming as good news?

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December 21, 2016

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Sometimes we are slow to recognize who is for us and for us in the best way. An angel brings good news to shepherds living in the fields, and the shepherds' first reaction is one of fear. They are filled with joy over the message yet fearful of the messenger.

These two responses often go hand in hand when we have a personal encounter with the God who seeks to redeem us. We are at once fearful and joyful. If we can manage to overcome the fear of being encountered by God in unexpected ways, the joy that awaits us is greater than anything we could ask or think. The coming of Jesus into human history is good news--but it can only be recognized as good news if the people who inhabit the world sense their deep need for what Jesus offers and are willing to accept it on God's terms.

Years ago, when I was a young pastor in Texas, our church had a Christmas party to which we invited all the children in the community. We served a traditional Christmas dinner with all the trimmings. The children in this poor neighborhood looked forward to this celebratory meal, open to all. And they could hardly contain their excitement because they had also been told that Santa Claus would make an appearance.

When the children and their parents were done eating, we dimmed the lights in the fellowship hall and had Santa walk in and take his seat. It was dark, but they could see just enough of his red suit and flowing white hair to know that it was Santa

Claus. The children were elated. Shouts and cries filled the air: "There he is."

Then the lights were turned up, and the children saw that Santa Claus was black.

Some of them recoiled in fear and refused to come up to the front to get their gifts. Though I tried my best to convince them that this was indeed *their* Santa Claus, some of them simply could not accept him--they openly protested that *Santa Claus is not black*. For others the gifts in his hands outweighed the color of his skin, so they made their peace with him and returned to their seats devouring the fruit and candy they received.

Often when God draws nigh unto us we are filled with fear and joy. Our challenge is to overcome the fear and accept what God sends--and the way God sends it. A black Santa Claus is indeed a type of the one who comes among us in surprising and unexpected ways.