

150 years ago this week, the Rev. Phillips Brooks, one of the greatest preachers in the history of the Episcopal Church, was visiting the Holy Land. On Christmas Eve he visited Bethlehem. A few years later he wrote about his experiences in a Christmas Carol: "O Little Town of Bethlehem." At the end of the first verse, he wrote about Bethlehem, "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."

The hopes and fears of all the years. That line seems especially important in 2015.

It's been a rough year in our world. We began back in January with shootings at the *Charlie Hebdo* office in Paris by Al-Qaeda terrorists.

Last month, we again saw even deadlier terrorist attacks in Paris, this time by the group known as ISIL or ISIS.

We've seen a number of shootings and attacks in the news in our own country: at a Marine recruiting office in TN, a church Bible study in SC, a college in OR, even a Christmas party in CA.

It's been a rough year. And there's much fear and uncertainty in our world. I know many people, myself included, are still concerned about ISIS and the instability they're bringing in Syria and Iraq, as well as the dangers they pose outside that area.

ISIS is not all that powerful militarily. But they are undoubtedly brutal and barbaric. And they have been frighteningly effective in using social media to radicalize and recruit members from other countries.

Now, I know in my head that the chances of me being killed by terrorism are extremely small. About the same number of people are killed by deer every year in the United States as were killed in the Paris attacks by ISIS. And driving to work statistically is one of the riskiest things I do every day, yet I accept those risks.

And it's one thing to know that in my head. But terrorist attacks are particularly effective at short circuiting our thinking process. They strike fear into our heart. That is their goal and purpose, to cause terror. And when attacks come in especially brutal and barbaric ways, they are even more frightening.

And we human beings have a remarkable ability to bracket off daily risks that we take that are part of our ordinary world: automobile accidents, heart disease, natural disasters. We accept such things as part of life. We may not like them, but we grudgingly accept them as part of our world.

But what often scares us is deaths caused by moral evil. Morally evil acts are intentional, when someone chooses to cause pain, suffering, and even death to random victims. Deaths because of moral evil get through our armor, and they burrow their way deep into our core and cause us to be angry and fearful at a primal level.

I was reading about the experience of Daniel Kahneman. Dr. Kahneman is an expert in psychology and behavioral economics. He specializes in dealing with the ways that human beings make decisions. He describes and quantifies how our emotions can cause us to make irrational decisions. He won a Nobel Prize for his work in 2002.

And yet, at the same time he became a Nobel laureate for describing other people's fears, he himself had great difficulty with his own fears. He was teaching for a few years in Israel during a period where there were terrorist bus bombings. There were 23 attacks in 3 years which killed a total of 236 people. He knew as an expert in risk and in decision making that the chances of being a victim of such an attack were miniscule. On average one person was killed in a bus bombing every 4 days, and each day in Israel there were 1.3 million people who rode buses safely.

He writes of his own experience during those times.

"I did not have much occasion to travel by bus, as I was driving a car, but I was chagrined to discover that my behavior was also affected. I found that I did not like to stop next to a bus at a red light, and I drove away more quickly than usual when the light changed. I was ashamed of myself, because of course I knew better. I knew that the risk was truly negligible... In fact, I was more likely to be injured in a driving accident than stopping near a bus."¹

Dr. Kahneman's experience reminds us of how difficult it is to function in a world in the face of moral evil. We will often feel fear that is disproportionate to the level of danger we face. Again, that is exactly what terroristic groups like ISIS are hoping for, to cause us to fear.

Of course, when confronting a group like ISIS there are a number of complex geopolitical and military policy questions that must be addressed.

But these questions are outside my area of expertise. They are also outside the purview of this sermon. Those are important questions and debates, but they're not my primary purpose this morning.

Instead, my concern is our spiritual response. How do we respond spiritually in the face of moral evil? How do we respond to our own fears?

Ironically, our OT lesson deals with a threat from the same area of the world which is currently controlled by ISIS. At that time the region was known as the Assyrian Empire. More than 2,700 years ago the Prophet Micah was addressing the Assyrian threat. And as scary as the threat of ISIS is in our day, the Assyrian threat in Micah's day was much worse. ISIS might shoot or decapitate a relatively small number of people. The Assyrian threat was that they would wipe out entire cities and nations. And if you happened to survive in battle against the Assyrians, they were notorious for impaling their captured prisoners on sharp spikes until they died excruciating deaths by slow torture.

¹ Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, p.322f

In the verses leading up to our OT lesson, Micah speaks of the threat that the people will be facing from the Assyrians. The people are fearful and worried. Micah compares their current situation to a woman in the midst of full-blown labor pains. But like a woman in labor, current pain will lead to future happiness.

Assyria may have one battle plan. But Micah says that God has a different plan. And that's where our OT lesson begins.

Micah says that a new ruler will rise up in Judah. The old king may have been defeated and humiliated. But God will raise up a new king. He will be from Bethlehem, King David's hometown. Bethlehem is insignificant in the geo-political scheme of things.

But God says, "But you, O Bethlehem... who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel."

It's a pattern repeated over and over again in scripture. The world may write off or disregard that which is small or weak or insignificant. But from little Bethlehem God promises a new ruler. And God says, "From you shall come forth for me" the new ruler. For me. The new king will not have his own interests at heart. He will be centered on God's interests. He will rule 'for God, on behalf of God, like God would.'

And this new king shall be a shepherd. Micah says, "He shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD."

And this new shepherd king will bring security, a different kind of security. Micah says, "They shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace."

Unlike other kings, this king will bring true security. And he will bring true peace. His will not be the kind of security won with a sword. It will be a deeper kind of security.

Of course, it should be no surprise that we Christians see Micah's prophecies fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. He is our true King, the Good Shepherd, the Prince of Peace.

The hopes and fears of all the years meet in Bethlehem. All the years. The time of Micah's prophecy. 700 years later at the time of Jesus' birth. And 2,020 years later as we prepare yet again to celebrate his coming into our world.

The Prince of Peace comes at Christmas offering true, deep, and everlasting peace. It is a peace that comes from the good news that nothing, not even death itself can separate us from God's love. It is a peace that comes from living in love rather than living in fear.

The question is, will we accept it? We can keep living in fear, we can keep resisting the peace that Jesus offers us. But the outcome has already been decided. Jesus has defeated the powers of sin and death.

We can keep living in fear, or we can trust in the Lord of Love, whose perfect love casts out all fear. We can trust in the Lord of Life, who through his death brings us eternal life. Jesus is our Shepherd King who brings true security. Jesus is our Prince of Peace. Jesus has done for us what we could never do for ourselves. And he offers a deeper and truer peace than anything else in the world could ever give.

Come to Bethlehem. Bring your hopes. Bring your fears. And find the peace offered by the Prince of Peace.