

THE SURPRISE OF CHRISTMAS, VICTORY OVER FEAR

by **Julián Carrón**

Dear Editor, the existential insecurity people face today plunges them into fear. There are so many situations we cannot control with our own strength! This was also the case in the times of the prophet Isaiah. With war imminent, the house of Judah sought to obtain an alliance with a foreign power, the Assyrians. In dealing with fear, the same temptation always enters: to entrust ourselves to power, to the strongest, in the hope they will free us from our state of insecurity. But things do not work out that way, and the fear does not lessen. At this point, God takes the initiative and speaks to Ahaz, the king of Judah, through the prophet Isaiah, to tell him this is not the only road, and that there is a safer one: to trust the one “power” able to go to the root of the fear and defeat it (cf. Is. 7:10-14). The road we would consider an abstraction becomes more realistic. The people of Israel has verified this time after time in its history.

God does not merely proclaim His passion for the destiny of the human person, but He intervenes in history, taking initiatives that can also overturn situations that would seem already defined. This was the case of a young woman, Mary, betrothed to Joseph, of the house of David (cf. Lk. 1:26-38). It could be perceived as an undue interference that ruins the plans of an engaged couple, but actually, it is the initiative that every person hopes for, consciously or unconsciously, beginning with Mary: “Hail favored one: the Lord is with you!” Who would not want to be seen with this tenderness? It is as if through the Angel’s announcement, God told her, “Only a presence can respond to all the world’s fear and all the people’s insecurity; I cause this to be perceived first of all in you. I cause this presence to happen in you. I cause it to dwell within you so that it can reach everyone! You will conceive and bear a son, and you will call Him Jesus.”

With this absolutely unique initiative, God assures her and all people that they will no longer be alone, victims of fear, that they can always depend on that Presence, no matter what situation they face. In front of any challenge, they need not fear, for they will be able to live it in His companionship. They have found grace with God.

But this initiative must be accepted. The response is not at all taken for granted, not even Mary’s. In hearing those words, she could have been frightened or so overcome as to want to escape. That woman’s reason and freedom were involved. Mary made herself available, accepting that unforeseen and unforeseeable announcement: “May it be done to me according to your word.”

The most dramatic moment, however, has yet to come: it is when the Angel leaves her. Why does God leave her? The Mystery does not want to impose Himself overbearingly. It is as if He withdraws from the scene to leave space for her freedom. We often ask ourselves, disturbed, why He does not spare her this. It is because the announcement cannot be submitted to passively, much less imposed from outside. Only in freedom can it become her own. How did it become hers? “Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart.” From that time on, Our Lady has shown the method of life for facing all circumstances. Through this way a new “I” emerges, an “I” with a new self-awareness, no longer crushed by fear, because everything is dominated by that Presence. This opportunity is within reach of Mary’s freedom, just as it is accessible to each of us today, who through concrete, specific encounters, are reached by the announcement of the “God with us.”

The Mystery's action in our existence does not magically defeat fear, but it fills life with His presence, provoking our reason and freedom to recognize it. Only those who acknowledge it and entrust themselves to it can verify just to what extent this fear is vanquished by His presence. "Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled" (Lk. 1:45).

God does not spare us the road of verification, as He did not spare Our Lady. Victory over existential insecurity and fear happens according to a design that is not our own, but that happens. God's audacious initiative to Mary also reaches us this Christmas, renewing the announcement of a radical newness: "Christianity is a presence within your daily life, a presence that guarantees an unimaginable change, unimaginable" (Fr. Giussani). History is replete with witnesses to this. No obstacle stands up to His initiative, neither skepticism nor incapacity, sickness, or circumstances.

If we embrace His Presence, which reaches us today through a human sign, that change is introduced into our lives. We no longer stand alone in front of the unforeseen events of life. As Pope Francis said in recent days, "Christmas brings unexpected changes to life. The Almighty is a little Child. Who would have expected this? Christmas is the celebration of an unprecedented God who overturns our logic and our expectations... a surprise, not a thing that we have already seen" (General Audience, December 19, 2018).

Today, as well, will He find a heart willing to welcome Him?

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