

“God In the Doorway”

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Script: Matthew 3:1-12

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1

Annie Dillard, in her book *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, has a story about her childhood that I would like to begin with today.

One cold Christmas eve I was up unnaturally late because we had all gone out to dinner—my parents, my baby sister, and I. We had come home to a warm living room, and Christmas Eve. Our stockings drooped from the mantel; beside them, a special table bore a bottle of ginger ale and a plate of cookies.

I had taken off my fancy winter coat and was standing on the heat register to bake my shoe soles and warm my bare legs. There was a commotion at the front door; it opened, and cold wind blew around my dress.

Everyone was calling me. "Look who's here! Look who's here!" I looked. It was Santa Claus. Whom I never—ever—wanted to meet. Santa Claus was looming in the doorway and looking around for me. My mother's voice was thrilled: "Look who's here!" I ran upstairs.

Like everyone in his right mind, I feared Santa Claus, thinking he was God. I was still thoughtless and brute, reactive. I knew right from wrong, but had barely tested the possibility of shaping my own behavior, and then only from fear, and not yet from love. Santa Claus was an old man whom you never saw, but who nevertheless saw you; he knew when you'd been bad or good. He knew when you'd been bad or good! And I had been bad.

My mother called and called, enthusiastic, pleading; I wouldn't come down. My father encouraged me; my sister howled. I wouldn't come down, but I could bend over the stairwell and see: Santa Claus stood in the doorway with night over his shoulder, letting in all the cold air of the sky; Santa Claus stood in the doorway monstrous and bright, powerless, ringing a loud bell and repeating Merry Christmas, Merry Christmas. I never came down. I don't know who ate the cookies.

For so many years now I have known that this Santa Claus was actually a rigged-up Miss White, who lived across the street, that I confuse the *dramatis personae* in my mind, making of Santa Claus, God, and Miss White an awesome, vulnerable trinity. This is really a story about Miss White.

Miss White was old; she lived alone in the big house across the street. She liked having me around; she plied me with cookies, taught me things about the world, and tried to interest me in finger painting, in which she herself took great pleasure. She would set up easels in her kitchen, tack enormous slick soaking papers to their frames, and paint undulating undersea scenes: horizontal smears of color sparked by occasional vertical streaks which were understood to be fixed kelp. I liked her. She meant no harm on earth, and yet half a year after her failed visit as Santa Claus, I ran from her again.

That day, a day of the following summer, Miss White and I knelt in her yard while she showed me a magnifying glass. It was a large, strong hand lens. She lifted my hand and, holding it very still, focused a dab of sunshine on my palm. The glowing crescent wobbled, spread, and finally contracted to a point. It burned; I was burned; I ripped my hand away and ran home crying. Miss White called after me, sorry, explaining, but I didn't look back.

Even now I wonder: if I meet God, will he take and hold my bare hand in his, and focus his eye on my palm, and kindle that spot and let me burn?

But no. It is I who misunderstood everything and let everybody down. Miss White, God, I am sorry I ran from you. I am still running, running from that knowledge, that eye, that love from which there is no refuge. For you meant only love, and love, and I felt only fear, and pain. So once in Israel love came to us incarnate, stood in the doorway between two worlds, and we were all afraid.¹

If I were a good preacher I would say “Amen”, sit down and let the story do its work, but my insecurities have led me to talk some more... thinking that I need to earn my pay this week.

God is in the Doorway between two worlds in advent. **What is our response to the Coming of Christ?** Annie Dillard’s was fear: she saw the coming of God as only an occasion of fear— judgment. God knows who’s been naughty & nice. The accidental burning with Miss White brought more pain and fear. She was not able to “shape her own behavior” and she knew she had been bad. Fear.

When we hear what John the Baptist says about God in the doorway we also have reason to fear: he talks about the “wrath to come...” and judging between the good and bad. John says that when the messiah comes,

“He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

A baptism of fire doesn’t sound all that much like Good News to me, nor does burning chaff. Getting burned from the sun’s rays in a magnifying glass is beyond the extent of any burning I’m interested in.

King Herod wasn’t too thrilled with God in the doorway either. Out of his fear he saw this infant as a rival to his power. It led him to kill all the males two years and younger in the whole region to eliminate this threat.

We’ve domesticated Christmas and God so much that these reactions of fear to the coming of Christ sound almost offensive. We speak of God as love, and indeed that is the Good News we proclaim; God’s heart, the center of his character is the heart of the prodigal’s father... **Yet, perhaps there should be some element of fear** in our reaction.

When God is in the doorway— close at hand, Emmanuel, incarnate... **fear is a reasonable response.** “Do not fear... do not fear... do not fear” we hear in Scripture over and over, which tells us there was plenty of fearing going on to begin with. We talk with a calm familiarity about God, like he is our brother-in-law or a neighbor down the street. But when the almighty shows up on your doorstep *for real*, we begin to understand why the Hebrews didn’t utter God’s name out-loud. “The fear of the Lord” has been used in our own religious past to instill that sense of reverence and awe. But we also know that more often than not it was used to control people and children. The belief was that if we lived in fear of God’s punishment—(a God who sees all and knows when we’ve been naughty and nice), then maybe we would behave and do what they wanted us to. It is this misuse of religion that led many people to walk out of the church. That and taking the wheat and chaff image to mean that certain people are worthless chaff who are going to burn forever and the rest of “us” are the good wheat of course.

So in an effort to not “go there,” and in response to the images Christ himself offers (i.e., the Prodigal’s welcoming and forgiving father) we focus upon more palatable images of a loving God. But fear is perhaps an appropriate response for a couple of reasons. Annie Dillard’s “trinity” of God, Miss White, and Santa Clause brought fear of punishment. I don’t believe we ought to have a fear of God in this

sense. The fear I'm considering as appropriate for meeting the Almighty is based first of all on the ancient Hebrews' sense that "no one can see God and live."

When God is in the doorway, the fear that comes is based upon a desire to survive as an individual. When confronted by the immensity and love of God there comes over us a fear that a full glimpse of it will obliterate us completely. To see God face to face is to have one's humanity taken away—to no longer be a human in the usual sense, to be burned by God's love into dust, and so to even have a taste of this is frightening. To fully see God is to **cease to be** in any sense that we know of... to see God and take the fullness of God's self in, is more than we can take.

So in one sense the fear is normal, wondrous—though probably unfounded since God does not allow us too much of him this side of the grave so as to take away our human choice and dignity.

The other sense in which fear is appropriate to us is the fear that we share with Herod; there is a rival to our position. We may not have a kingdom to defend, but we're not so sure we want another ruler taking over our lives. If Christ really does come into us, then we will lose control...of our lives, our agenda, our desires, our values, our spending, perhaps even replacing other things we hold dear. Christ comes with a magnifying glass to purify our lives, and that can be painful. He comes to sift the wheat and the chaff. His agenda is to purify us...to destroy the impure within our characters...our souls. And while that sounds good, (if we are honest with ourselves), we are fearful of even that, for on some levels we kinda like our chaff—the gossip, the petty judging, the comforts of fudging, of selfishness and lying to ourselves and others. We are fearful, because we don't know who we are without our sinful chaff. If we allow God to cross the threshold, who knows where that will lead? Perhaps we will surrender some of our time, resources, comforts, and comfortable assumptions in the efforts for a more just and sustainable society and life.

Advent means that God is in the doorway. **What is your response?** Fear? How is God burning your chaff? How is God transforming you? What needs to go? How is your fear hindering God's work in you?

Annie Dillard confessed that she's "**still running, running from that knowledge, that eye, that love from which there is no refuge.**" I find that my confession is similar to hers. This advent, I pray that I will face my fear, stop running and surrender (even to the pain), and invite Christ across the threshold of my heart continually and have him lead me. Perhaps that is your prayer too. So be it. Amen.

ⁱ Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, pp. 137-139.