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Luke 1:5-13; Lamentations 3:55-57
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We Long for God to Break In

Back in 2008, as Session was discussing whether or not to go forward with building this sanctuary, the recession had just hit. Understandably, one elder was extremely leery of taking out loans for the project. We could sense their fear of what could go wrong if things didn't work out.

At this particular meeting, the Rev. Bruce Armstrong was with us. Bruce served as our Committee on Ministry liaison with the Cascades Presbytery. He was very excited about our plans. Bruce said something that I'll never forget. He said, "Fear is never a good basis for making sound decisions. But faith is. Is God is leading you into this and do you have faith that God will provide what you need?"

And with that, we chose to go forward in faith...not fear.

Thank God we did!

Our Advent theme this year is What Do You Fear? and the role that fear plays in each of our scripture stories. Zechariah's, Joseph's, and Mary's encounters with the Angel Gabriel. And the shepherds encounter with the heavenly hosts on the night that Jesus was born.

Each time, the word from heaven is, "Do not fear."

But what does that mean? That is what we will explore today.

Our scriptures come from Lamentations 3:56-57

I called on your name, Lord,
from the depths of the pit.

You heard my plea: "Do not close your ears
to my cry for relief."

You came near when I called you,
and you said, "Do not fear."

And Luke 1:5-13

In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. **6** Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. **7** But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

8 Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, **9** he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to

go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. **10** And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

11 Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. **12** When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. **13** But the angel said to him: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

What I want to do this morning is look at the following questions. What is fear? What was causing fear for the Israelites in Lamentations? How does fear play into Zechariah’s story? What do we fear today? How should we address our fear in light of Jesus’ coming?

What is fear? Fear is one of seven universal emotions experienced by everyone around the world, through all times. Fear arises with the threat of harm, either physical, emotional, spiritual, or psychological, real or imagined. While it is traditionally considered a “negative” emotion, fear actually serves an important role in keeping us safe as it mobilizes us to cope with potential danger. There are different levels of fear from terror and horror on the worst extreme and nervousness and trepidation on the lesser.

Fear is normal.

What was causing the Israelites to fear in our Lamentation’s verses?

We don’t know for sure who wrote the Book of Lamentations. Jewish tradition attributes it to the prophet Jeremiah. What was certain was that it was written by someone who had first hand experience of the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon and the destruction of the temple in 586 B.C. They would have experienced the terror and horror of having their homes destroyed and their people taken away into captivity. Imagine the Hamas terrorist attack on Israeli settlements on October 7, 2023. That was the basis of their fear.

The backstory was that Israel was continually unfaithful in their covenant with God, so God used the Babylonians as human agents for God’s divine judgment. Today Orthodox Jews read the entire book aloud on the traditional day of the temple’s destruction. Many Jews read it at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem’s Old City. It is a lament of their sin and a call for God’s forgiveness and mercy.

Israel felt forsaken by God. Abandoned. Rejected. Without hope. They longed for God to break into their darkness and cast out their fear.

Which is where these two verses pop in seemingly out of nowhere.

"I called upon your name, O Lord, from the depths of the pit.

You heard my plea: ‘Do not close your ears to my cry for relief.’

You came near when I called to you, and you said, ‘Do not fear.’”

The Hebrew word for fear used here is yare. It means to affright, to make afraid, or to put in fearful reverence. In the Old Testament, it is often used to describe human encounters with God.

When God says, “Do not fear.” It’s as if God were saying, “I’m not going to destroy you. You’re going to be alright. I am with you.”

As I read parts of Lamentations this week, I couldn’t help but think of both the Hamas hostages and their families AND the innocent Palestinian people of Gaza must feel right now. 1200 Israeli settlers were brutally murdered, 253 taken hostage and nearly 70,000 people have been killed since the start of the war on October 7. Homes and businesses have been destroyed. People are starving. And Israel is allowing very little humanitarian aid through to help the most vulnerable.

How they must long for God to break into their despair! To hear God say, “I’m not going to destroy you. It’s going to be alright. I am with you. Do not fear!”

Skip forward to Luke and some 500 years after the Babylonian exile. For 400 years there was complete silence from God...no word what so ever. Just silence.

Luke describes the setting as “In the time of King Herod.” That tells us a lot about the context of Zachariah and Elizabeth’s story. Judea was ransacked once again and this time occupied by the Romans. This was Caesar’s world which we heard about last week. Caesar tormented and manipulated his subjects with fear and chaos. You never knew what Caesar was going to do. It was all about him and expanding his empire.

King Herod, on the other hand, was the spineless puppet king put in place by Caesar. He was a Jew who would do Caesar’s bidding in order to maintain his own power base at the expense of his own people he was called to serve. King Herod was a lot like some of our spineless politicians today who refuse to stand up to the illegal, immoral, and unconstitutional actions of our leaders.

Fear, then and today, is a tool used by tyrants to keep people under their thumb. To not cause a fuss. And to permit blatant abuses of power to go unchecked.

And the Jewish religious leaders were a lot like some pastors today. They were happy to look the other way as long as their religious and political agendas were satisfied.

This was the time of King Herod of Judah. A time of prevalent fear. This was the system in which Zechariah served as priest in the temple before God. Except Zechariah was different than the rest. Luke tells us that Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commandments and regulations blamelessly.

The Greek word that Luke uses for upright is diakios. It means righteous, just, upright. By implication, innocent. It's the same word that Matthew uses to describe Joseph, Mary's fiancée.

The Greek word for blameless is amemptos. It means faultless, morally pure, or above reproach.

I'm not so keen on the translation that our text uses of observing the Lord's commands. The Greek implication is much stronger. It means that they walked in the way of the Lord. They were faithful followers of Yahweh. Much the same way that Adam and Eve walked with God before their fall into sin.

So we get this sense that Zechariah and Elizabeth were trying to be as faithful and true as they possibly could within a corrupt and tyrannical political and religious construct.

And yet there was a problem. They were old and they had no children. You see back then being barren was wrongfully considered a curse, a sign of divine judgment. And yet Luke was very clear, they had done everything right.

As it goes Zechariah was offering his once annual service of burning the incense on the altar in the temple while the worshippers prayed outside. It was then that an angel of the Lord appeared at the right side of the altar of incense. The right side signifies divine authority, honor and favor. The angel was there to bless Zechariah and reassure him, not condemn him. Needless to say, Zechariah was startled and gripped with fear.

How might you respond if an angel of the Lord showed up in your time of personal prayer?

I'm sure we'd be uncertain. Perhaps uncomfortable. Fearful of what the angel had to say.

Remember Zechariah was steeped in a political and religious construct that used fear to keep people in their places. He was conditioned to wonder, "What have I done wrong now?" Also remember, it had been 400 years since they had received any word or messengers from God. So this was extraordinarily strange and unreal.

Notice that the angel's message was one of comfort, encouragement, and promise. "Do not be afraid." Phobeo me, in Greek. Fear not. Don't be frightened. Don't run away.

Let's think for a moment about how the angel might have said these words.

Do not fear or Fear not! Would be a command, almost shaming.

Do not be afraid. Sounds a little more warm and inviting.

Or what do you fear? This invites question, reflection and response.

And I love that the angel actually calls Zechariah by name.

Then says, "Your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. He will be a joy and delight to you,

and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.”

The one thing that Zechariah and Elizabeth had hoped for. A child. Even now in their old age. This was good news. The best news ever.

And yet, Zechariah was afraid. What was he so afraid of?

Perhaps they had been down this road many times before. Perhaps they had experienced many miscarriages over the years. And he was too scared to get his hopes up again.

God had broken through the long silence of their barrenness. It was all a little too much to believe. Too much to grasp.

You know when you’ve been hurt so many times before, it’s easy to be so guarded that you struggle to believe when good fortune actually comes your way. It’s a self protection to prevent ourselves from being hurt any further.

I wonder if that was what Zechariah feared most.

What do you fear?

A recent online article published by Popular Science was titled, “What Americans Fear Most in 2025.”¹ It was based on research by Chapman University of 1015 adults who were asked about some 60 different fears. For the 10th consecutive year, corrupt governmental officials topped the list. 69.1% of participants feared this most. This was followed by fears of people we love becoming seriously ill. Economic or financial collapse. Cyberterrorism. People we love dying. Another world war. Pollution of drinking water. Russia’s use of nuclear weapons. Pollution of oceans, rivers, and lakes. And finally government tracking personal data.

All legitimate fears.

The article suggests three key practices to mitigate fear... limiting media exposure, researching fears to better understand them, and building community. Because fear, like anxiety, feeds off isolation, so the stronger our communities are, the better off we are.

In the Old Testament book of Joshua, just before Joshua was to lead the Israelites into the Promised Land after wandering in the wilderness for forty years, the people were greatly afraid. God told Joshua, “Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.”²

Yes, they had legitimate fears. This was new territory. The enemy was strong and wouldn’t go without fighting. And it entailed great risk.

¹ Sarah Durn published October 23, 2025. <https://www.popsci.com/health/biggest-fears-2025/>

² Joshua 1:9

But the one thing that Joshua and the Israelites had going for them was the promise of God's presence. It's the same thing that Zechariah and Elizabeth had going for them. And the Israelites in Babylonian captivity from Lamentations as well.

My friends, that is the beauty of the Advent Season. We can look forward with hope no matter how dark life might be right now. The Prophet Isaiah said, "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned."³ No matter how impossible our current circumstance may be, the Good News is that God is with us. God is with you!

So may we be encouraged that even when we are gripped with fear and think we've reached the end of our ropes. When we think that nothing good could possibly come from our dire circumstance. When our corrupt political and religious construct couldn't get any worse. When we long for God to break in.

When we think that no life is left in us, Zechariah and Elizabeth remind us that our story is still being written. God is not done with us yet. In fact, God might be conceiving something new in us right now that is yet to show.

Fear is never a good basis for making sound decisions. But faith is.

But in the meantime, in a world that is baked with fear, we wait.

We pray.

We trust.

We hope.

We believe that God is with us, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Emmanuel.

Let us pray.

In a fearful world,
may we look for God's spirit.
May we reach for each other's hands.
May we choose courage whenever we can.
And in all things, may we remember
that good news is louder than fear.
In the name of the one who calls,
the one who sends,
and the one who journey's with -
let us go in peace and
be not afraid.
Amen.

³ Isaiah 9:2