

## “What do you fear? Insisting on Hope”

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Advent 1, Lamentations 3:55-57; Luke 1:5-11

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Today we begin our Advent journey, which is a lead up to Christmas, of course. But it is also way more than that. Advent is an invitation to pay attention. This is ironic in a world that is trying to convince us to drown out our insecurities with shopping and decorating and drinking. That's the world's idea of how to get ready for a celebration, right? But God prepares God's people in a different way - but creating space to name fears; inviting us into community that depends on one another; and sometimes, to be quiet for longer than we would wish: which is where Zechariah comes in.

Zechariah is a 1st century Jewish priest. He comes from a long line of priests. It is an honor his family has passed on for generations. But by the time Zechariah becomes a priest, things have changed. He may have been just old enough to remember what it was like when his people ruled themselves; when his community had freedom to worship as they saw fit; and then he would've watched everything change as the Roman government took over in the name of peace and put Herod on the throne. Instead of priests being honored for their generational leadership, the priests that were easily bribed were the ones who became important to Herod. Instead of the Temple being the center of religious life, it became the place for Herod to enlarge his ego by creating bigger plans. Herod's brutality was ruthless as he kept control through brute force. The author of the Gospel of Luke opens by naming that Herod is in power not just to put this story in historical context, but rather to let us feel the weight of what it would've been like for Zechariah to grow up in a system that wanted to use him and his family rather than looking to them for wisdom; a system that noticed his authority when they wanted to control the people, but had no respect for his leadership; and then, on top of all of that, we find out that even though Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth are faithful people, that they have not been able to have a child - that their family's priestly tradition is not only threatened by outside sources of the Roman government and Herod's involvement in it; it's also threatened by the end of their family line in not being able to give birth to an heir.

This is where we begin Advent - with fear in all corners of Zechariah's life.

We all know what it's like to be afraid. It is a human emotion, meant to keep us alive. For our ancestors it meant survival to know what was a danger and what was not. For us today it's not so different - we teach our kids to not run into the street because they might get run over; to go to the basement when the sky turns green and the wind picks up. Fear, when it's working for us, can help us make good decisions and to survive to adulthood. But often we act out of fear before we even realize we're afraid, and this can get us into trouble. When there isn't actually a threat to our lives, but our body is sending us signals that there is, we can lash out and hurt those around us. If we experience trauma as a child and are not able to work through it as we grow, we will find that we may take coping skills that helped us survive back then and use them in ways that destroy our relationships as an adult. When we are taught that anyone strange to us is a threat, then our bodies tell us to fear even when someone is trying to offer us help; or connect with us; or is just minding their own business. Add in the ways systematic racism influences all of us in this country and the ways in which people in power play upon our fears to pit us against each other, and it's not uncommon for the fear inside of us to do more harm than good, especially when it comes to how we relate to one another.

Author and psychologist Denise Fournier says of course there are lots of reasons to be afraid in our world today - we don't want to get rid of fear when it has so much wisdom for us. But what we can do, is try to make friends with our fear so that we learn from it and don't let it control us. So how do we break the cycle of fear within our bodies, our relationships, our families, and our community? The first thing we do, she says, is to get curious about why we're feeling anxious or afraid. We may have a very good reason to feel this way, but can we name what it is? Do we have any control over changing it? How can we hold our fear long enough in a curious way so that we don't react, shut down, or immediately go to a coping source of comfort?

Zechariah goes into the holy of holies in the Temple — the very center where God is supposed to be, and when Zechariah then faces an angel, we are told he is terrified. I can imagine he was afraid before he walked in, right? Living with all of the pressures of the Roman Empire, the priestly life, his role as a husband and leader in their community, Zechariah probably walks in with a lot of fear; and then an angel appears and Zechariah doesn't know what to do. Fear overwhelms him. But the angel says to him, "Do not be afraid." I don't think this is a command or a negating of his fear. I think the angel wants Zechariah to get curious - awe and fear can feel exactly the same in our bodies - the angel wants Zechariah to realize that this is different. That God is doing something amazing to bless him and he doesn't need to be afraid.

The second thing Fournier says we can do with our fear, is to extend compassion. Our bodies are trying to save us, not hurt us. So our fear can easily change quickly into annoyance, disgust, contempt, and then anger and even rage. When we can take a deep breath and extend compassion towards those we see in this state and also to ourselves when we realize we're feeling this way, we can practice feeling our fear without getting overwhelmed or judging ourselves and others for feeling it. Zechariah isn't there in our story this morning - I can imagine there's all kinds of judgment he's feeling towards himself; all kinds of secondary feelings, perhaps especially towards God. We didn't keep reading further into the story this morning, but if we had, you would've heard that when Zechariah comes out of the holy of holies, when he goes to face the people outside, he can't talk - the angel takes away his voice until his son is born. And I wonder if this is actually a gift to help Zechariah come to a place of compassion for himself - to work through and have to face his fears; his hopes; his dreams that he had lost— to carry all of it in a new way that created space for compassion.

The third thing Fournier says we can do to make friends with our fear, and that is to practice the courage it takes to move towards our fears instead of away from them. Eleanor Roosevelt has a great quote about this. She said, "You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face."

Advent is a time when we hear the stories of the people of our faith, whose lives are full of fear; and also whose lives are full of courage as they do the thing that seems impossible. As much as Zechariah longed for a child, I wonder if he was also terrified of having a child in such a violent and lonely and insecure time. I wonder if he was afraid of how to raise his son to be faithful to God in a time when the priests who had a good living were the ones who served Rome more loyally than God. He and Elizabeth must've had all kinds of fears, as all parents do, and yet they pour their love and faithfulness into their son, bearing witness to the hope they have in the living God. And I think our scripture this morning gives us a clue as to how Zechariah and Elizabeth find the courage they need in the time and place they live. We are told when Zechariah enters the holy of holies, that the whole assembly of the people were praying outside. When Zechariah

goes in to be in the holiest of places, he doesn't go alone; he takes the community with him. And when he comes out, he does not come out alone, he goes out to eventually share the good news that is not his alone; but will be good news for the whole community.

The best place I know of to face my fears, is with all of you. Here is the place where we learn new ways of being in the world. Here is where we experience love in all of its struggles and joy and hope so that we can practice it in our everyday lives. Here, in community is where we hold each other in prayer to face the places in our lives where fear has a hold of us, finding the courage to learn from our fear as God guides us and reminds us we need not be afraid. This is the journey of Advent - a journey of God coming to us in the midst of our fear; in spite of our despair; in hope that we will open our hearts and see that while our fears are so very real, so is the truth of God's love; so is the longing of our hearts towards life; so is the gift of God's very presence within us.