

Where Hope and Fear Meet

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Advent / Hope / Luke 1:5–25

Zechariah: hope

Notes

Isai

Romans 8:18-end (hope)

What would you do if you weren't afraid?

I don't enjoy spiders, but I especially don't like snakes. I know, many of them are harmless and while I've built up the nerve to be around and deal with spiders I haven't quite with snakes, probably because I never know which way they will slither. But again I try to keep it together, for the kids.

When I worked at an experiential school for youth at-risk in Windsor, most years we would take them to the high ropes course at Acadia University. There were challenges that we would need to work together as a group, including climbing a wall using only a rope, and no one was allowed to be left on one side. It would demonstrate how working together they would cheer each other on and this could

help each other overcome some of their fears. The ultimate goal though at the end was to climb a telephone pole, stand on the top of it, and jump off to try and catch a trapezee all while hooked to a harness and ropes that your fellow students below were holding.

The first time I did this scared me too death. The climbing the pole wasn't as difficult as I thought it to be, but once at the top and the shakiness of the pole, it started to get scary...(show the first two pictures)

One of the hardest parts was the last step from climbing the pole to now having to try and stand on the small circular part at the top and then making the decision to jump. (show next picture)

At the top you stand there overlooking so much, you have people cheering you on at the bottom, and you have to make a decision to face your fear. It was an opportunity for students to face up to how much they often overlooked what they could accomplish, for the group to cheer each other on, and to let go of so much when they jumped. At the top of the pole was a place where fear met with hope, and whether you caught the pole or not didn't matter, you were held up either way. So, you jumped.

(show picture)

I can't remember if this is the year I caught it or not, but it didn't matter.

The trick with the question, what would you do if you weren't afraid, is that you can't answer it until you first start thinking about what you're afraid of.

The passage for today comes from Luke 1:5-25

The beginning of the passage tells us that it takes place during King Herod's reign. This was not a peaceful time in Israel, in fact they were a defeated people watching a foreign power occupy their land and they were longing for deliverance. Zechariah and Elizabeth were both descendants of Aaron, the father of the priesthood in Israel. As the passage states, they were righteous and living blameless, yet Elizabeth was barren. They served God even though they did not have what they wanted. Being righteous and blameless does not mean a challenge-free life, exemption from heartaches, or that every desire will be granted. If you serve God for what you can get, then you actually serve yourself. This couple was longing for hope for a lot of things. Hope for a child and hope for deliverance. In those days it was seen as "what did you do?" as to why you didn't have children. Elizabeth felt the stigma and shame. If only the situation could have been thought as, what is God asking you to wait for, instead of What did you do?

We may live well past the years of possibility without receiving our hope; but if we are God's people, we will live righteously anyway because God is our hope.

Elizabeth and Zechariah endured this very test. Their examples provoke us to ask, Will we serve God faithfully through our disappointments? No child. No spouse. No dream job. No dream house or car. Will God mean more to us than all those things though we receive none of them?

Continuing on in the story, each morning, a priest was to enter the Holy Place in the temple and burn incense. The priests would cast lots to decide who would enter the inner sanctuary, and this day the lot fell to Zechariah, probably his only chance in his lifetime (at this time the country had about 20000 priests). But it was likely not by chance that Zechariah was on duty and that he was chosen that day to enter the Holy Place. God was guiding the events of history to prepare the way for Jesus to come to earth. You can almost hear the stark contrast between the outer world - the buzz and chatter of people outside awaiting worship - and the relative dark and stillness of the empty sanctuary just inside the doors where Zechariah was. Out of all the noise and in this silence, a space has been carved out of Zechariah's ordinary life to have an extraordinary encounter.

Then an angel appeared. Zechariah was terrified and overwhelmed with fear. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard.

As Erin Wathen wrote, "Fear is a natural human response to danger. Fight or flight instinct kicks in, and the resulting

adrenaline can save our lives. But so often, our body kicks off that fear response for something that is not life threatening at all. The pace of our lives and the state of the world leave our nerve endings fragile and frayed.”

The shock of seeing and hearing an angel was overwhelming for Zechariah and so he was afraid. A legitimate response I would think. The angel seems to be okay with the fear, for he says, do not be afraid, telling him that God has answered his prayers.

Does the angel refer to Zechariah’s prayer for a son or for the deliverance of Israel? Zechariah has been praying for a child, but also as it at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people are praying outside. While Zechariah is inside the Holy Place the whole assembly of people are outside praying and these prayers, most likely, would be related to the fate of the people of Israel. More than one perspective is present in this scripture. The prayers of the people are interwoven with those of Zechariah. Through divine intervention, both story lines, that of Zechariah with Elizabeth and of Israel are brought together explicitly. By acting on behalf of Zechariah and Elizabeth, God is acting on behalf of Israel.

The news to Zechariah, that his wife will become pregnant and bear a son, whom they will call John. The fear wasn’t what got Zechariah in a bit of heat though, it was his doubt. It wasn’t until Zechariah said, how can this be so? For a

moment Zechariah forgot that nothing is impossible with God. So, take note: if a messenger of God comes bearing gifts, you say thank you and then be silent!

Did you know you can block out the noonday sun with a quarter? All you have to do is bring the quarter right up to your eye. We sometimes hold our problems and limitations to our eyes in that way, bringing them so close to our eyes we cannot see the great, glowing sun of God's promises and God's power.

When our eyes are on our problems, we will not remember God's Word and how it applies to us.

Then the angel replied,

“I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.”

Fear isn't what got Zechariah in trouble...it was his doubt. But God didn't take away what he said...no, he was still going to make it happen, but Zechariah needed to wait...in silence. It's more than certification; also a result of his unbelief. But God can use anything for his glory, because even this is used to advance God's purpose, for Zechariah's silence will contribute in a key way to the later account of the naming of the child. In the interim, Zechariah's silence

serves to guard the news of God's unfolding purpose until the appointed time. God didn't take away what he said he was going to do because of the unbelief, no, he was true to His promise, but Zechariah needed to wait.....in silence.

Many people are afraid of silence. People often associate silence with negative judgments or disapproval, fearing they'll be perceived as boring or uninterested. This anxiety can lead to a need to fill every second with conversation or noise to avoid these uncomfortable feelings. The silence of nature is filled with the silence of construction and traffic. Or the more technology is at our fingertips, in particular, phones which add noise to our life everyday that even when we do seek out a silent sanctuary, we may find that our inner dialogue remains on at High Volume, as its been so long since we have experienced external quiet, it becomes so difficult to experience internal quiet.

As an author wrote, "It's probably for the best that Zechariah came down with long-term laryngitis. Otherwise, he might have run right home to blurt out the same sort of things to his wife that he just said to the angel! Can you imagine? Just picture Zechariah going home and saying to Elizabeth: Come on now, I believe in the Lord's mighty powers and all, but you are no spring chicken!"

God probably saved Zechariah from a lot of trouble, and maybe sleeping on the sofa (or floor in this case?).

The last two verses of this passage remind us of Elizabeth's righteousness. Her open acceptance of God's intervention on her behalf contracts her husband's hesitation and unbelief. These two responses are placed side by side focusing the question for Israel: How will "the people" respond to the divine initiative to redeem God's people, to remove their shame in the face of the nations? It also poses the question for us: Will we believe, acknowledging the gracious hand of God?

Elizabeth remained in seclusion for 5 months, a mystery as to why.

But I love how one writer put it, "In Elizabeth we glimpse a woman required to do much waiting. And yet, Elizabeth remained faithful. Upon finally becoming pregnant, after her hopes had long since gone, she spent five months alone, hushed and marveling at the miracle under way. As many a pregnant woman has done, she closed out the world and sat with God as he performed his great work of preparation. Truly, all waiting involves such deep work of preparation. In quiet solitude we can best open ourselves to this world of God in us."

And if you remember the passage from Exodus this morning, As Pharaoh drew near to Moses with the Israelites, the Israelites had great fear, crying out to the Lord, and Moses said, "Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today;

for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.” The Israelites saw the miraculous powers of God at the Red Sea, they only needed to keep still.

As advent begins, getting closer to Christmas, and the busyness of the season begins will we slow down and see what is happening in the stillness? Will we wait, in the silence, for what God can do, for his timing is perfect? Will we always keep that hope that is through the Lord?

I’m going to finish with a true story: Not long before Christmas, a pastor named Philips Brooks - feeling inspired by a recent trip to the birthplace of Jesus - wrote some song lyrics and asked his church organist to compose some music to accompany them. If it came together, the song would be used for the upcoming children’s Sunday school pageant. The program, of course, was to be presented the following Sunday (nothing like pressure). As in “I need to get this together for this Sunday, no pressure.” (I’m sure this would not be the first time in history that a pastor asked their church musician to pull something together at the last minute, especially in the run-up to Christmas time....hmm...I wonder how that works for me?!). By the night before the program, the organist, whose name was Louis Redner, had still not come up with the tune. But then, he says, “I was roused from sleep late in the night hearing an angel-strain whispering in my ear, and seizing a piece of

music paper I jotted down the treble of the tune as we now have it, and on Sunday morning before going to church I filled in the harmony. Neither Mr. Brooks nor I ever thought the carol or the music to it would live beyond that Christmas of 1868. Turns out, it did. We now know it as O Little Town of Bethlehem. The power of the carol comes in the iconic line: “The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.” Hope and fear are not things that many would automatically pair together like peanut butter and jam. Hope and love maybe, Hope and joy, but not hope and fear. But they are two sides of the same coin. In times of trouble or doubt, hope is where we find our best possible outcome, but fear is the worst possible scenarios that spins out in our minds. But hope and fear converge to form an intersection, a crossing that is in fact the perfect birthplace for God with us. Here is a great opportunity for humans to seek the divine will and presence, in the midst of our extremes, our chaos, our frequent human failing, to create the kingdom of heaven on earth. Where hope and fear meet and God steps down, hope wins the day. Hope and fear met for the Israelites at the Red Sea, hope and fear met for the Israelites during the time of King Herod, and God stepped down.

So, what are you afraid of? When was the last time you faced down your fears or anxieties by being still, knowing there is always hope with the Lord? Whether it’s a fear with

a physical response where you may scream and potentially run, or more often the fears we encounter that invoke an emotional response that drives your blood pressure and heart rate up, and shortens your patience, turn to God. Don't give up hope, God is always there. The angel to Zechariah doesn't mention there won't be hard parts, but speaks to a simple assurance, because God will abide with loving faithfulness in every moment of it. What if we were to hear that same sacred word spoken over our own lives, our own deepest fears, our darkest sleepless nights? Maybe we could name what it is we fear in the silence - and find our fear transformed by the certain presence of God. Be still in the silence and listen.

PAUSE

Where hope and fear meet, God steps down.

As we come to the table, I found this prayer that I want to share with you first, so let us pray:

God of the abundant table, forgive us when we pretend there is not enough room here when we haggle over the guest list and the seating arrangements though you have called us only to set the table. As we wait for Christ to be born among us again, teach us to make more room, not less. May we learn to see Jesus in the least and the last, and may we bring that seat to the head of the table. Amen

