

Luke 1:5-13; Lamentations 3:55-57

What do you think of our bulletin cover? I'm sure the finance committee is thinking, "How much is this costing us?", but in all seriousness, what do you think of it? I love the dichotomy of the images. Lit candles that speak of hope, peace, joy, and love. And the bottom banner that asks: What do you fear?

This is the theme of our Advent series this year: What do you fear? Maybe not what people would expect for an Advent theme. We're told that this is the time to be jolly, to be merry and bright. But the reality is that there are often things in life that make us anxious, even fearful.

When I was at my last church, the youth director told me that there were certain topics that she had to stay far away from, the biggest being climate change. It made the youth extremely anxious to talk about. I wonder what other things may now make them anxious with all that is going on in this country right now, but because we are sinful humans, there will always be things that make us feel anxious or afraid.

This passage from Luke begins with these words: "In the days of Herod". We are reminded that they were living under occupation, under Roman rule. They were not a free people. And the same for the writer of Lamentations. They were living in exile in Babylon when that passage was written. Difficult times to be living in.

While there is still much to be thankful for in the lives we live here in the United States, I'm sure that there are many people living in cities that have the National Guard deployed to their streets, and ICE kidnapping people off their streets, who would say that they feel like they are living in occupied territory. And even from a distance, it is hard not to feel anxious about what is happening in our country. Lives being lost from ICE detention to lives being lost

because of illegal orders given. I'm sure you grieved as I did over the young National Guard, Sarah Beckstrom, who died and the other guard, Andrew Wolfe, who continues to battle for his life. These are unsettling times.

And even if you are good at being an ostrich, as my sister is, that is to say choosing to tune out what's going on in the country, there are still many things in our personal lives that can make us anxious or fearful - one's health or the health of a spouse, concerns for children, economic challenges. We don't live in a vacuum free from stress and anxiety, even if we are able to tune out the national news.

But lest I pull you down with these negative challenges we are currently facing, notice what is written below the question: What do you fear question? **Insisting on Hope this Advent.**

Hope. But what is hope? When I was in college I went through a really rough period. My eldest brother was sick. I remember talking with a man from Campus Crusade who spoke of Jeremiah 29: 11: "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a future and a hope."

That word **hope** confused me. My brother had been sick for a long time and as much as I hoped he would get better, he was getting worse. But the biblical definition of hope is much different from our secular understanding of the word. Hope isn't just wishful thinking, a Pollyanna optimism, or a toxic positivity. **The biblical meaning of hope is a confident expectation and assurance of future goodness based on God's character and faithfulness. When I say "I hope in the Lord", I'm saying that I have confidence in God to care for me and love me no matter what I'm going through and that I know this won't last forever; that**

there is future goodness waiting for me based on God's goodness and faithfulness to me.

I understand that it is hard to believe in hope when life looks bleak, but think of Zechariah. He was childless. Elizabeth had been barren their entire married life. They were now quite up there in years and still they longed for a child. In their culture, people thought that couples without children had obviously lost favor with God. God was not blessing them with children because of something they must have done. Yet the scripture tells us that they were righteous and blameless. Day after day, year after year, they hoped for that child. And then, when God decides to bless them, God does so in a spectacular way - an angel comes to Zachariah and we are told that he was **terrified, that fear overwhelmed him.**

Now it is interesting to note that the Greek word used for terrified is the same root word used when the Angel visited Mary. They were terrified! Why would God allow them to be terrified when God wants to do something wonderful for them?

The authors of the Sanctified Art material that we are using this Advent, suggest that perhaps the goal of fear is to develop a compassionate relationship with it, using fear **as a tool for deeper faith, bolder courage, and resilient hope.** And isn't that what happened to Zechariah? Despite being made mute for the nine months of Elizabeth's pregnancy because of his disbelief when he was told this good news, the first thing out of his mouth when he could speak again he praised God. God doesn't always act like we expect God to. God is not on our timetable and hard times come, but one point of this story is God's goodness to Zechariah and Elizabeth.

Once I asked one of my deacon boards to get in pairs and to share with their partner a time when they knew without a shadow

of a doubt that God was with them. It wasn't in those sunny moments of life that they talked about, marriage, giving birth, but in the hard times of life that they spoke - when a son was into drugs and self-destructing and all hope seemed lost, when a spouse or parent was diagnosed with cancer and they were living through long and hard days and nights of fear and worry. In each case, despite the darkness of the situation, they found faith; they found God's presence in the midst of fear.

The point of the exercise was to help them remember; because remembering how God had proven faithful in the past - even when all hope seemed lost - builds confidence that God can be trusted in the present and future.

Another thing that I have found is when we name our fears, literally take our fears to God and name them out loud, instead of trying to suppress those fears, there's a release. The problem is still there, but it's a little easier to bear. We remember that we aren't alone in any of life's challenges.

Zechariah and Elizabeth eventually got the child they'd hoped for and what a son he turned out to be! But we know that God doesn't always answer our prayers the way we want God to. Loved ones die. Couples remain childless. Yet what we can be sure about is that God is listening to every prayer, feeling our deepest aches, and drawing near to us when we tremble. Yet, Luke and Lamentations remind us of the angel's words, "Do not fear."

"I called on your name, O Lord, from the depths of the pit; you heard my plea, 'Do not close your ear to my cry for help, but give me relief!' You came near when I called on you; you said, "Do not fear!"

Hear those words loud and clear this morning. Do not Fear!!

I'm ending the sermon here. I wrote the sermon to be short, so that we could spend some time in silent prayer. In this reflective time after the sermon, which we will be extending today, I would ask that you name your fears, the things you are anxious about, and turn them over to God. Then listen for his voice as he says to you, "Do not fear!" God will break in and hope will be found, if we would just be still and turn to the God who promises us a future and a hope. Amen