

## **Fear not!**

Luke 1:5-16

December 7, 2014

Fear is the default. Fear is the default human attitude, which means that we respond to the challenges of our lives out of fear, unless something is done proactively to change our hearts.

We began our Advent last week with that claim. Fear is the default. Do you think so? Do you recognize in yourself the tendrils of fear pervading your spirit?

Fear of the unknown? Fear of the future? Fear of the past and of the hold the past has on your future? Fear of dying? Fear of aging?

Fear of failure? Fear of success? Fear of other people judging you? Fear of other people hurting you?

Fear of strangers? Fear of people different from you? Fear of ways of thinking and believing and being different from you?

Fear of loss? Fear of disappointment? Fear of disappointing? Fear of disappointing someone you love? Fear of disappointing yourself?

And if you do recognize some such fears in yourself, do you also acknowledge their effect? Fear builds walls -- actual walls, but virtual walls, too. We put up defensive shields around our selves and our spirits, shutting out the things we fear, and shutting us in. Fear shrinks us, shrinks the footprint of our whole existence, as we pull back and pull in to stay safe. Fear insulates us and fear isolates us.

And fear deadens compassion. When so much of our energy, physical and emotional, is directed at self-protection, we just don't notice most of the people around us. And when we do, we parcel out our compassion in bite-size bits, not wanting to leave ourselves too exhausted, too exposed, too vulnerable.

But Advent's refrain is this: "Fear not!"

"Fear not!" That's what the Lord's messenger says to Joseph in the gospel of Matthew: "Do not be afraid!" And that's what the Lord's messenger says in the gospel of Luke to a group of shepherds and to Mary and to Zechariah: "Do not be afraid!"

(Read aloud Luke 1:5-16)

*Don't be afraid, Zechariah!*

What was he afraid of?

*Don't be afraid, Zechariah! God has heard your prayer.*

Zechariah was afraid that God isn't listening. And Zechariah is a priest! Even as he performed his priestly service, burning incense on the altar of the Lord as a sensual representation of the prayers his people were offering simultaneously outside the Temple walls, Zechariah was afraid that God isn't listening.

But he did his priestly service anyway! He prayed anyway, Was he being hypocritical? Was he being dishonest, with himself and with the people? If Zechariah really was afraid God isn't listening, shouldn't he have hung up his priestly robes and lived out the rest of his old age tending olive trees?

Or isn't Zechariah like so many of us? We continue to pray, even though we are not certain we are heard or that we'll ever get the answer we want. We continue to offer God our worship and offer God our service even when we are not sure if God is there or if God is paying us any attention. We choose to be faithful in spite of our questions and in spite of our doubts, or maybe it is that we choose to be faithful along with our questions and along with our doubts.

We choose to bring all of it to God, even when we aren't convinced that God is listening or that God cares, because the alternative is despair. We choose to believe even when we harbor fears that our belief is mistaken, and that is faith!

*Don't be afraid, Zechariah! God has heard your prayer.*

What was Zechariah's prayer? What prayer did he fear would remain unanswered?

*God has heard your prayer, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son.*

Was this his prayer, a prayer for a child for him and for Elizabeth, a prayer for a son? Surely he had prayed that prayer, but just as surely he had given up that prayer a long time back. He and Elizabeth were old. That opportunity, that blessing, had already passed them by.

That fear -- of being childless, of having no heir to bear the imprint of his name, his faith, his hopes, his passions into a new generation -- that fear had long ago hardened into resignation. That's what untended fear does: it hardens, it calcifies, it deadens, until there is no more hoping, no more trying, no more living.

Are you afraid that you will have no heir, no spiritual children? Are you afraid there will be none to carry forward your faith, your passions, your convictions? Has fear hardened your spirit? Have you stopped trying, stopped expecting, stopped praying?

But Zechariah was still praying.

*God has heard your prayer, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son and how happy many will be when he is born ... [because] he will bring back many people to the Lord their God.*

This is the prayer Zechariah was still praying, the prayer he didn't think God was hearing -- a prayer for his people! He was afraid for his people: afraid they would fall into despair, afraid they would forsake the ways of the Lord for the ways of this world, because they had been beaten down so long, because God had been silent so long.

He was afraid for their resignation even as he was himself resigned, afraid for their aimlessness even as he doubted his own purpose, afraid for the deadening and destabilizing effects of sin even as he failed to see any reward to righteousness.

Are we afraid? Are we afraid that our church will die, that our churches will die, afraid that we will not have any spiritual descendants? Are we afraid for a world fallen into despair, for a world pursuing selfish pleasures at the expense of righteousness, for a world engulfed in aimlessness and sin?

Even as we pray for Jesus to come this Advent -- into our own lives, into this world -- are we afraid that he won't come, or even if he does, that it won't make any difference? Are we afraid that the tidings of great joy will fall on deaf ears and the declaration of peace on earth will remain an empty promise? Are our fears for this world, and for ourselves, hardening into resignation, hardening into despair, hardening into indifference?

*Don't be afraid, Zechariah! God has heard your prayer and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son ... how happy and glad you will be, and how happy many will be when he is born!*

A son was born to Zechariah and Elizabeth. A son was born to Zechariah and Elizabeth and to the people of Israel, and he was given the name, John. And this is the song Zechariah sang when his son was born:

*Let us praise the Lord, the God of Israel!  
He has come to the help of his people  
and has set them free.  
Our God is merciful and tender.  
He will cause the bright dawn of salvation  
to rise on us  
and to shine from heaven on all those  
who live in the dark shadow of death,  
to guide our steps into the path of peace.*

He sang because God listened. He sang because God did hear his prayer.

Don't be afraid! God has heard your prayer ...