The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, November 30, 2025

So, as we prepare to hear God's word read and proclaimed, I invite you to get comfy in your pews and to take a deep breath in with me

and to breathe it out slowly.

Another deep breath in and breathe it out slowly.

Breathe in God's mercies

and breathe out God's mercies to others.

and breathe in God's mercies and breathe out God's mercies to others.

Holy Spirit, you are as close as our very next breath. And so we pray that you would dwell within us and around us in these moments. That by your presence you would quiet us to any voice but your own. That we might hear your word for us this day. And that in hearing we might be called to lead lives of response. So may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

So, not only do we begin the season of Advent this day, but we begin a new sermon series as well. We've entitled it Insisting on Hope. Insisting on Hope. That wasn't the original title. We're using some wonderful resources from Sanctified Arts, which I commend to you, as this wonderful arts collaborative that was born out of pastors within our denomination. And the title that was imagined in that place was What Do You Fear? That was the title of the sermon series. And then there was a subtitle, Insisting on Hope, and Mary and I in our planning process made the intentional decision to say that we were going to flip those titles, right? We are going to be people in this season of Advent who insist on hope. And we understand that to do that honestly and to do that well, we have to be honest about the fears that are in the world and within our lives as well. So this series is going to do two things at one time. It's going to make us face that which we fear, and it's going to reassure us of the insistence of our God on hope's triumph in the world.

So, we're going to read two scripture lessons this day. The first from Lamentations and then from the Gospel according to Luke. The Lamentations text comes to us from the third chapter, verses 55- 57.

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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 heard my plea, and you came near when I called to you, and you said, "Do not fear."

And in our second lesson from the Gospel according to Luke, the first chapter, we're going to read verses 5 through 13 together. Let us listen for God's word to each of us and indeed to God's church.

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zachariah who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was descended from the daughters of Aaron and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children because Elizabeth was barren and both were getting on in years. Once when Zachariah was serving as priest before God during his section's turn of duty, he was chosen by lot according to the custom of the priesthood to enter the sanctuary of the Lord to offer incense. Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people were praying outside. And then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zachariah saw her… saw him, he was terrified and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid, Zachariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John."
The grass withers, and the flower fades, but the word of our Lord endures forever. Amen.

So, it's important for us if we're going to endeavor into this wrestling with fear that we frame fear rightly and appropriately. Okay? The authors of our scripture do that for us. They frame fear in two specific ways. The author of the Gospel of Luke frames it very succinctly with one part of one line of the text. It was right there at the beginning in verse 5. “In the days of King Herod of Judea…in the days of King Herod of Judea.” With just those few words, those hearing the gospel read to them, heard it aloud, they would have understood the communal framing that the gospel writer was trying to accomplish. Okay? Very specific language that puts them in a very specific context. With these words the Gospel of Luke grounds the birth of our Savior, the thing that we wait expectantly for in this season of Advent. It grounds the birth of our Savior in a world shaped by violence and occupation and fear. Okay, this is not a golden age of peace and spiritual clarity and enlightenment. No, this is a time, a time of the gospel, a time of survival under empire. Okay? Herod was the Roman appointed ruler of Judea, and he governed with paranoia and with cruelty. His power, secured through imperial alliance, was maintained by coercion and surveillance and brutality. This is the framing of what we would understand as communal fear. This is the temperature in the room collectively that the people are having to navigate. Okay.

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Later we will–about 33 years from now in the story of Jesus–we'll hear about another governor who is present and important in this story that we hear together, but this morning at the beginning of the gospel story it's framed as the time when King Herod was king of Judea. The people hearing this gospel for the first time would have known exactly what that meant. They would have felt a tightness in their chest just as they heard it. Okay. So when we're thinking about fear, when we're contemplating fear, we have to first frame it communally. Not a time of enlightenment, but a time of imperial authority's presence. Okay? So there's communal fear. That's what's going on. That's the air that the people are breathing. But there's some some other kind of framing of fear as well. And this fear is particular to Zachariah, and to Elizabeth. Okay. And this fear has to do with their personal lives. We frame fear communally, but we also have to frame it personally. Zachariah and Elizabeth, the text tells us, were without child, and they were getting on in age. Isn't that a nice way to talk about getting older? They were getting on in age. Yeah. But in that small phrase that they were without child, the author frames their personal fears. Y'all probably know that in that time being childless was seen as somewhat of a…of a scarlet letter, right? There was something that you had done wrong as a couple for you not to be able to bear a child. God had in some way smited you, right? So there was a lot of what I would call social judgment that surrounded Elizabeth and Zechariah in this time. Okay. But there's also a really practical side of this, and that is they are getting on in age, and therefore the question persists. Who will care for them in their later years? Who will tend to them when they are sick, feed them when they are hungry and in need of care? This is a real question and a real fear that they would have been wrestling with in this time. This would have been their personal fear. Not just social stigma but care in advanced age. Some of us in this space have contemplated that question already. Maybe because of age or station, right? What does it look like to be cared for when you're without child, right? Or your children aren't here, they are somewhere else.

This is the framing of the fear of our story. And it's into this communal and personal framing that we hear that Zachariah…he draws the lot to go in and to share incense in the temple in the holiest of holies. Okay. And he does that, and I love the way the gospel writer paints this picture for us. Zachariah makes his way into this place, right? Have y'all ever been to an Episcopal church? Maybe you've gone to GSL or something like that, and you've seen the incense being brought into the space. I was in Santiago de Compostela over the summer, and there's this huge deal that spins at like 50 miles an hour around the middle of the sanctuary. It's wild and it has incense going all over. That's not what was happening. What was happening is something more meek and meager than that, right? But the idea is the same. You're walking into this space carrying with you, preparing to be present in the holiest of places, right? And what happens in that place? An angel of the Lord appears to Zachariah. And scripture tells us something really, really interesting. Scripture tells us that when the angel of the Lord appeared to Zachariah, in

verse 12, it says, "When Zachariah saw him, Zachariah was terrified and fear overwhelmed him." This is interesting to me. I think it's worth us taking note of. Zachariah is going into the holiest of holy places, and he is surprised when God shows up. Okay? He is surprised when God shows up. He has been intentional about his preparation for this. He knows what he is doing, and yet he is surprised when God shows up. Maybe God shows up a little bit differently than Zachariah had intended or expected, right? I wonder what you expected when you came to this place this morning. It's not the Holy of Holies, but it certainly is a holy place. Did you expect to be greeted by your God here? Did you expect to sit and to maybe see God in a new way showing up? Sometimes us church folk, we kind of get into the routine of it. And it strikes me that Zachariah might have gotten a little bit too much into the routine of his religious practice. And that had in some way lessened his expectation that God was going to show up in his life in that moment. I wonder if you came to this place this morning expectant to have a movement of the Holy Spirit of God in your life.

When we're open to that, we're expecting of it. More often than not, it happens. It happens in the verse of a song or a hymn that strikes at our hearts. It happens in a word from the text. It happens in a handshake or a hug or a greeting from someone you haven't seen in a while. It happens in a prayer when we're expectant. I wonder if we came this morning expectant that God was going to greet us here. That's something for you to think about a little bit later. But Zachariah wasn't ready for it. He wasn't ready for the way that God was going to show up. Not into his life and not into his fear. But God indeed does show up in the form of an angel. And God says, "Do not fear. Your prayer has been heard. You and Elizabeth are going to have a child." God meets Zachariah in the place of fear with a word of grace and hope. And that's important for us to remember this day because when I think about the communal framing of fear and the personal framing of fear, I think about how heavy and weighty those can be, right? In fact, I spent…I figured if I was going to ask y'all over this season of Advent to contemplate what it is that you fear and then to make you insist upon hope, that I needed to kind of sit with my own fears for a while. So, I have this little room in my house. Actually, when it was built by the original owners, this room, this now green from, you know, floor to ceiling, and it's like this little library for me. And when it was built in 1928, the same year as the sanctuary, for the first 20 plus years, this room was the examination room for the doctor who lived in the home, right? And so, babies were born in this room, people died in this room, people were cared for and tended to. Their wounds were healed in this room. Right? And so when I sit there doing my morning devotional in that space, drinking an Americano and contemplating the divine, I think about more often than not the generations that were present in that place. And I wonder what fear they carried to seeing their doctor that day. Right? And so I had to sit there and kind of reflect on the fears that I've had in my life. I remember being fearful on the first day of school of seventh grade, right? My mom had passed

away on June 12th, right after my sixth grade year ended. And so on my first day of school, 7th grade, I was terrified about how the kids were going to meet me. I didn't want them to talk about it, right? But I kind of needed them to talk about it or maybe give me a hug, right? I think about the fears that we carry as adolescents, right? I think about graduating college and my plans not working out like they were supposed to and not having a second plan necessarily and being terrified that I was just going to be aimless, right? Prisoner to the moment. I think about graduating seminary and turning down a couple jobs and then not having a job. It's amazing how that works. And being terrified about that, fearful of what ministry was going to look like. The MDiv, it's a great degree, not very marketable. Okay. I think about moving through my 30s, and all my friends getting married, right? Watching that happen. People partner up, some have kids, some being unable to have children, wondering about those questions. Who will care for you? I thought about it this week. The fears that I've had up to being 44 in my life. I thought about the fears that were probably present in that green room that's now a library for me. And I thought about us and how we really collectively this morning represent everything from…from birth to our most advanced years, right? And the reality is that fear has this way of meeting us exactly where we are and introducing us to something that is unique to our age and stage to be afraid of. Right? So I wonder what fear you're facing this day. I wonder what fear looks like for you. We can all together without much imagining understand the communal fear that is surrounding the world right now. But I wonder about the particularities of your fear. I wonder if it has something to do with your health or the health of someone you love. I wonder if it has to do with a relationship, maybe romantic or familial. I wonder if your fear is about a job or providing for yourself or your family. I wonder if your fear is about your children or not having children. I wonder if your fear is about your faith right now in this season of waiting.

Maybe you're fearful about the world around us. Maybe the fear in which our neighbors are being forced to live not only makes you angry, but it makes you fearful as well. Sitting in that green room this week, contemplating the fears that I've had over my lifetime and the ones that I hold with me right now, I started hearing and reflecting on this morning's text as an invitation to us to contemplate our fears, right? To be intentional about what those are in this time. I don't know what your green room is, your library, but I want to invite you this week, maybe this afternoon–it's too cold to get outside, right--make yourself an Americano or a hot chocolate or tea, whatever is your thing. Find some quiet space and time to contemplate, to face what it is that you are fearful of right now. Right? And to draw it in to the center of who you are, right? And to not push it away too quickly. Sit with it. Look at it. Reflect on it. Take some different views of it. Right? I want to invite you to…to hold that fear just in front of you and then to to hear the voice of the author of Lamentations.

To hear the voice of the one who says, "I was afraid and you came close to me. You drew near to me." Right? The same God that met the one who lamented also met Zachariah in his place of fear and wanting. Right? And that same God, that same God promises to meet you as well. Okay? Now, here's the deal. This season is long. The light is getting dimmer and dimmer each day. The sun goes down at what, like 3:45 now? I don't know. I hate that. I'll be honest with you. We got several weeks to go, right?

But what we know to be true, what we know to be gospel is that the God of all creation is making God's way into that place, right? to attend to us in our fear and to give us a stubborn hope. And so I wonder as you hold that fear before you this day, I wonder if you might also hold that truth as well, that the God who met the lamenting one and the God who met Zachariah also meets you in that place. Now, that hope might show up in a way that you didn't expect and that might make you afraid and that would put you in good company. Zachariah was a righteous man, Scripture says, right? But I wonder…I wonder if in that place holding together both our fear and the incarnation of our God, we might contemplate two questions. And there are questions that grow straight from our text this day.

What if, unlike Zechariah, we move into this season expectant that God is going to show up in our lives, expectant that God has a word of hope for us in this exact season in our lives. not just going about our religious practices but on the edge of our proverbial seats.

That's question number one. What if you move through this season in that way? And then the second question is this. What if and this is…I love this. When the angel appears to Zachariah, his response is fear. And then in verse 12, when Zachariah saw him, he was terrified and fear overwhelmed him. Then verse 13 says this, "But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zachariah, for your prayer has been heard." Your prayer has been heard. What if…what if the second question that you ponder this day is if your prayer has already been heard by your God, right? That sitting in the midst of that fear and contemplating the incarnation, meeting you there, what if the God that you know, the God that we collectively come to worship this day has already heard that prayer, right?

I wonder if you might take some more intention today. Find your green space, your green room, your library. draw the fear that is within you before you and also draw the hope of our God.

Okay, I'm going to invite a prayer now for all of us to practice that and maybe for that to transform the way that we move through the season together. Okay, so let's pray.

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Gracious and loving God, we've come here for all sorts of different reasons. Some of us very expectant that you are going to work in this place and have a word for us here. And some of us out of a religious practice, and yet we're all still here. And so we pray that you would surprise us with your hopefulness this day for us. We pray, Lord, that we might move into this season with a brand new sort of intention that you're going to continue to show up. And we pray, Lord, that we would trust with our whole heart and mind and soul that you have heard our prayers.

So let your hope, your insistent hope meet us in our fear, help us to trust and believe that you have drawn near to us, oh God, and be with us in this Advent season. We lift these prayers in the one that is to come, Jesus the Christ. Amen.