

“In the Time of Herod...”

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Sunday, November 30, 2025

Texts: Luke 1: 5-13 and laments 3: 55-57

I don't know how much you know about King Herod, and I'm not sure a Sunday morning sermon is the best place to lecture about the man, but suffice it to say that when Luke situates the birth of John the Baptist and Jesus “in the time of King Herod,” it is not good news. In the words of Dr. Boyung Lee, “...the Gospel [of Luke] grounds the birth of Jesus in a world shaped by violence, occupation and fear. This was no golden age of peace or spiritual clarity—it was a time of survival under empire. Herod, the Roman-appointed ruler of Judea, governed with paranoia and cruelty. His power, secured through imperial alliance, was maintained by coercion, surveillance, and brutality. Luke situates the story of Jesus within these political realities. His Gospel is not only spiritual but political—resistance in the face of empire.” To put it in succinct terms, it was a time of great fear. There are many times that we live in times of great fear, personal and communal. What is fear? Where does it come from? What do we do about it? Most importantly, what's God up to when we are afraid?

The word fear or the word afraid are mentioned several times in Luke's opening chapters. Some of the fears we understand. Others we can't quite imagine. In our story for today, we find Zechariah and Elizabeth—an aging priestly couple not marked by prominence, but by longing. They long for a child and there are many layers to a couple's desire to have children when they are unable. This was especially true in their day and

time. Yet somehow, they remained faithful while waiting for God to act. I don't know about you, but for me, waiting is often the most difficult thing to do in life. In fact, waiting is so difficult, we want to skip to the good news of the story that comes later. But for a moment, just consider what life might be like for Zechariah and Elizabeth. Waiting and waiting and waiting and wondering. Painful times to be sure.

Yet Zechariah had things to do. No matter how paralyzed we are by our feelings, it seems like there is always something we still need to do. Amid our pain and suffering, we go about our daily tasks waiting and wondering. While offering incense in the temple, Zechariah encounters a divine messenger. His response? Fear. Not relief, not joy, not singing out in praise...fear. In fact, Dr. Lee tells us that Luke uses the Greek verb *tarassó*--to be troubled, disturbed or agitated. "This is no fleeting startle. It evokes deep inner shaking, a disruption of body and spirit. *Tarassó* is the soul's recoil from the unexpected, the mind's clamor in the face of uncertainty, the body's trembling at the threshold of something it cannot control.

Dr. Lee goes on to say, "Fear, in this context, is not failure. It is a natural human response to divine interruption. But fear can become more than a reaction. It can take root and become a way of being." Think about your own fears. Are they a reaction to something, or have your fears taken root to such an extent that they have taken root and become your way of being? Fears can drive and direct our lives in ways we can see, and in ways we cannot see. Over the next several weeks, we are going to explore our fear, learn to name it, and remove its power over us – or redirect that power. Jesus said (John 14:27), "Let not your hearts be troubled (*tarassó*), and do not be afraid (*deilliaó*)." The second

term, *deilliaó*, “implies a shrinking of heart, our spirit—a fear that inhibits action and diminishes courage. Together, these words describe fear that doesn’t just visit—it settles. [This is] fear that shapes our posture toward the world.”

Let’s pause again as fear can be traumatic. This is especially true of our “big” fears. You know them well, the ones that keep you up at night. You may be agitated right now, and it’s good for us to just stop a minute and take a couple of deep breaths. Maybe close our eyes. Let our hearts and our minds settle for a minute.

Returning to the story... “When the angel says, ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard,’ it is not a dismissal.” So many times, when we are afraid or in pain, we quickly dismiss it (or are told to), and that is often the least helpful thing we can do. Recognition comes first. Naming our fears is where to begin. Whether inside or out loud, we name our fear, which begins our process of dealing with it (or them).

Here is the second part about the angels’ announcement, though. “Your fear is real—but it is not the only truth. God has already been listening. God enters the silence, the ache, the barrenness—into the very place where fear has taken root (Lee)”. Note here what Dr. Lee tells us next, “And God’s response begins not with miracle, but with recognition: your prayer has been heard.” This is something that all of us forget. Just because things don’t resolve the way we hope that they do, does not mean that our prayer has not been heard. One of the other first steps in healing is to be heard. This is where God begins—hearing what you have to say and what is on your heart. It doesn’t matter how you say it, or when

you say it—you are heard. While the world may ignore you, you can rest assured that God is always listening, always present, always loving.

Therefore, this Advent, we are called not to suppress our fear, but to name it: to ourselves, to God, to a trusted friend or partner. Ask yourself, “How does fear live in me? What voices has it amplified? What longing has it silenced?” (pause)

Trauma theologians remind us that, “Fear can be a teacher. It tells us that something matters. That something is at stake. IT is the voice of our vulnerability asking not to be erased but acknowledged. Advent gives us room to sit with fear—not to banish it, but to listen.” I have some more questions for you, courtesy of Sanctified Arts and its authors:

What are we afraid to hope for?

What have we stopped praying for?

Where has fear coed us to shrink back?

These are not intended to be guilt-inducing questions. Your fears are not little. Your fears matter. Something important is at stake. We forget when we read our Bible the true nature of our heroes and heroines. They didn’t have it all figured out. They weren’t always right. They dealt with many of the same things you and I deal with. One of them is fear. It’s clear from our story that Zechariah’s fear doesn’t disqualify him. It marks the beginning of his transformation. “Even in his silence, he becomes part of the unfolding story—his life bearing witness to a God who hears, disrupts, and enters fearful places with grace.”

I want to end today where Dr. Lee ends their commentary on this passage:

"In the time of Herod..." the world was loud with empire's threats, echoing with grief and longing. And still—God broke in. In the time of fear, God heard a prayer, and responded with presence. This Advent, perhaps the question is not how we rid ourselves of fear. Perhaps the deeper invitation is this: Can we name our fear honestly—and still believe God is near?"

Amen and Amen.