

Introduction to Scripture Perry Beeler

Our first reading is from *Luke 1*. In a time of fear and uncertainty, an angel comes to Zechariah with surprising news: God is still listening, and hope is already on the way.

Our second reading is from *Lamentations*. From the deepest pit, the writer cries out—and discovers that God is nearer than we imagine, whispering, “Do not be afraid.”

Witness of Ancient Wisdom Luke 1:5-13 | Lamentations 3:55-57

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was descended from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. 6 Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. 7 But they had no children ... and both were getting on in years. 8 Once when he was serving as priest before God during his section's turn of duty, 9 he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord to offer incense. 10 Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. 11 Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12 When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified, and fear overwhelmed him. 13 But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear ... a son, and you will name him John.

Lamentations 3:55-57

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!”

Witness of Modern Wisdom

“In the Time of Herod” by Rev. Sarah A. Speed

I didn’t live during Herod’s time—that brutal, murderous king, God save his soul.

But even hundreds of years later, I know the prayers of his people.

I know the prayers of the mothers and the children under his rule.

I know the prayers of the young men under his angry arm.

I know their prayers, because anyone who has ever lived in this soft world for more than two days

knows how to pray for a miracle.

We rub our hands together.

We fold weary shoulders in,

a cage of bone to protect our bleeding hearts.

We sing, we shall overcome and bind my wandering heart to thee.

We walk across bridges and in front of powerful buildings.

We cover our cars in stickers that scream, we will not give up!

We allow a hungry cry to slip from our lips,

giving our lament a life of its own (with room to dance!).

And when all of that is said and done, we whisper to our creator,

God, break through the yelling and the fear. Break through the violence and the oppression.

Get past the Herods of this world, and come be here.

Like every bleeding heart before, we pray for a miracle.

God is still speaking, **and we are still listening. Thanks be to God!**

Sermon

“Longing for Advent”

Rev. Adam Hange

Opening Prayer

Will you pray with me?

With-us God,
in the time of Moses,
you spoke through water in the desert and a pillar of smoke.
In the time of the judges,
you spoke through the prophets.
In the time of Herod,
you spoke through angel choruses and unlikely miracles.
In every time you have been speaking.
So today, in our time,
we ask that you would speak again.
Break through the chatter and the distraction of our weary minds
and speak to us once more.
With hope we pray,
Amen.

I know the Christmas season is really here when I find myself twenty feet in the air on my aluminum ladder, trying, once again, to hang Christmas lights from the roof.

Since I was a kid, I've had what I like to call a "healthy respect" for heights.

Every year, as I'm up there with cold fingers and tangled lights, the same thought flashes through my mind: *I could fall. I could really get hurt doing this.*

Fear, it turns out, is not exotic. It's ordinary. It's part of being human.

Some fears are almost silly:

Fear of saying the wrong thing at the work Christmas party.

Fear that your gift will be a disappointment.

But other fears cut deep:

Fear of losing your job or your home.

Fear of losing your health, your memory, your independence -fear of being "no real use" anymore.

Fear that this Christmas might be the last one for you, or for someone you love.

And in our Latino community, there are fears that many of us will never face: fear of being racially profiled, fear of *la migra* showing up on the way to work, at the grocery store, even outside the church; fear that a parent won't come home tonight.

Fear is a natural and normal human response to danger. We've heard of "fight, flight, freeze, or fawn." Our bodies are wired to keep us alive.

But over time, fear can move from being a passing reaction, to becoming a way of life. When this happens, our fear can take up permanent residence in our bodies, our thoughts, our relationships, even in our churches.

Which is why it matters that the Gospel of Luke begins the story of Jesus this way:

"In the days of King Herod..."

That little phrase is more than a date stamp. "In the days of King Herod" means: in a time when fear was in the air.

Herod the Great ruled Judea from 37-4 B.C.E., as a client king of Rome, and he maintained his power with violence, informants, and intimidation.

This is the same Herod, who in Matthew's gospel, when he couldn't locate the one born "king of the Jews," ordered the killing of innocent children, forcing the Holy Family to flee to Egypt. Or so the story goes.

This was a time of occupation, economic hardship, and deep uncertainty.

"In the days of King Herod" is Luke's way of saying: *Jesus was born into a world where fear made sense.*

Into that fearful world, Luke introduces us not to a king, but to an aging couple: the priest, Zechariah, and his wife, Elizabeth.

They are described as "righteous before God," but they carry a deep ache. They have no children. In their culture, that was not just a private grief; it was often seen as a sign that God was displeased.

Luke is careful to tell us that's not the case here. Their "barrenness" is not a judgment or a punishment. It is simply part of their story, part of the heavy weight they carry into their later years.

Some of us know that kind of weight: prayers prayed for so long that we stop expecting an answer; hopes that feel too foolish to speak out loud.

One ordinary day, Zechariah is in the temple offering incense. The smoke rises like the prayers of the people, and suddenly, an angel of the Lord appears.

And what happens? Zechariah does not break into a praise chorus. He does not say, "Finally! I've been expecting you!"

Luke tells us he was "terrified" and fear overwhelmed him.

This is not just a jump scare; it is a deep shaking. The kind of trembling that comes when life is out of control: the diagnosis you didn't expect, the layoff you didn't

see coming, the phone call in the middle of the night. It leaves him “rattled” and “shook.”

And yet, what are the first words out of the angel’s mouth?

“Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard.”

Those words do not deny the reality of fear. The angel doesn’t say, “There, there... there’s nothing to be afraid of!”

The angel says, “Do not be afraid... for your prayer has been heard.”

Your fear is real, but it is *not* the only truth. God has been listening even in the silence and waiting. God has not forgotten you, even when you felt forgotten.

This is where the Lamentations text comes alongside Luke. In Lamentations, we hear the voice of someone who feels like they are at the very bottom:

“I called on your name, O Lord,
from the depths of the pit...
You heard my plea...
You came near when I called on you;
you said, ‘Do not fear.’” (Lamentations 3:55–57)

Do you hear the echo?

In the depths of the pit: “Do not fear.”

In the smoke-filled temple: “Do not be afraid, your prayer has been heard.”

The reason I like the season of Advent so much, and why I wish more of us kept it better, before skipping ahead to Christmas... is that ...

Advent is for people who live “in the days of King Herod.” Advent is for people who know what it feels like to be in the pit.

It is not a season for people who have it all together. Advent is for the fearful, the weary, the ones who are not sure how much longer they can hold on.

We sing about the hopes and fears of all the year...

Some of our fears this year are the fears of a typical congregation: fears about numbers and energy and finances, fears that our best days as a church—or as individuals—might be behind us. Those fears are real.

And some of our deepest fears are borne by our immigrant neighbors and siblings: parents afraid to drive to work or take the kids to school, grandparents afraid of a knock on the door, teenagers wondering if they dare apply to college or even show up to youth group, because they don't know who is watching.

If Advent means anything, it has to mean something in the real world where those fears live.

So what does it mean to “insist on hope” in a time like this?

It begins with telling the truth about our fear in the presence of God. Zechariah's fear shows up right in the middle of his worship. The voice in Lamentations calls to God “from the depths of the pit.”

Advent is not about pretending to be cheerful. It is about bringing our honest fear, grief, and confusion into the light of God's presence.

God can work with reality. God can hold what we are *actually* feeling.

Insisting on hope also means listening for the small, stubborn word of grace:

*“Your prayer has been heard...
you came near when I called...
you said, ‘Do not fear.’”*

The situation may not change overnight. Herod is still on the throne at the end of Luke 1. Empires do not fall by the end of chapter two.

But in the middle of it, God is at work—in the love between two people who might have given up hope, in the courage of a teenage girl named Mary, in the birth of a child who will prepare the way.

Hope is not optimism. Hope is the quiet, persistent trust that God is moving... even when we cannot see how.

And insisting on hope means acting as if God's "Do not be afraid" is already true. It means refusing to let fear have the final say in how we live together.

For a congregation like ours, that might look like choosing curiosity over nostalgia—asking, "*How is God inviting us to be faithful now?*"

It might mean trying something new in worship, mentoring younger leaders, or blessing ministries that won't look exactly like they did thirty years ago.

For our immigrant neighbors, it will look like solidarity: accompanying someone to an appointment, learning more about what is happening in our own city, speaking up when policies harm families, and making this congregation a place where no one has to sit alone with their fear.

Every Sunday in Advent we light candles—small, fragile flames...to light our way through the dark.

We don't do that because the darkness is *imaginary*. We do it because the darkness is real, but it is not ultimate.

Each candle whispers, "In the time of King Herod... in the time of ICE raids... in the time of aging bodies and anxious hearts... God is still coming. God is still listening, still speaking, still at work. God is still with us."

I still don't love being on that ladder. My hands still shake a little. But every year, I find myself climbing anyway, because I know that when the lights finally switch

on, and the house glows in the dark, it reminds me that fear doesn't get the last word. The story is bigger than the ladder.

This Advent, as we name our fears and our longings, may we hear again the word spoken to Zechariah, and to the poet in Lamentations, and to us:

“Do not be afraid.
Your prayer has been heard.
When you called, I came near.
Do not fear.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.