"We Long for God to Break In

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Luke 1:5-13 (NRSVUE)

5 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 because Elizabeth was
barren, 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 you a son, and you will name him John.

Will there really be a "Morning"?
Is there such a thing as "Day"?
Could I see it from the mountains
If I were as tall as they? -Emily Dickinson
Morning, morning, where does morning lie?

"In the days of King Herod of Judea…" The opening verse of our Gospel Lesson today provides the setting – both the place and the time – of the events about to unfold. But Luke is doing more than just situating the story in the context of historical events. He is also painting a picture of the political environment before the birth of Jesus.

Herod was king, but not in the same sense as the famous kings over Israel and Judah like David, Solomon, and Hezekiah. Herod became king because Rome *named* him king, and his primary role was to serve the interests of the Roman Empire. In essence, he was a puppet king. The people over whom he claimed authority were the people of God: children of Abraham and descendants of those who had crossed the Red Sea, established the city of Jerusalem, built the first temple, survived captivity and exile in Babylon and returned to reclaim their heritage and rebuild their nation. But after only a brief period of self-rule, they had been conquered by the Romans and taken over by the empire.

To put their situation in modern context, it would be kind of like living in Mariupol in Eastern Ukraine, a city captured and held by Russia during the current war. Citizens of Mariupol are under martial law, suffering under oppression with little food and inconsistent electricity and heat. They are severely limited in where they can go and what they can do. Or, perhaps a better example is Palestinians living in Gaza. They have no autonomy, no say in their future or means

to rebuild, no real freedom. Starvation and illness are rampant, since most of their resources and infrastructure were destroyed. They are utterly under the thumb of Israel. If you can imagine what life is like in those places, you begin to get a picture of Jesus's world.

When Luke begins, "In the days of King Herod," he wants us to know that the story he is about to tell takes place when God's people suffered under an oppressive government with few prospects and little reason to hope. In order to maintain his authority, Herod had to extract and funnel wealth to Rome, while at the same time brutally thwarting his own people's quest for freedom. To live in Judea at the time of Jesus was to live in a state of constant anxiety and fear.

Luke's Gospel begins not with Jesus, but with John; more specifically, with John's parents and the miraculous circumstances surrounding *his* birth. Zechariah was a priest, married to Elizabeth who was also from a priestly family. They had no children and no expectations of having any, since they were beyond childbearing age.

One day, Zechariah was serving as the priest in charge at the temple, leading the people in worship. At a certain point in the service, the priest would go into the inner sanctuary to offer incense on behalf of the people. He entered alone, with the rest of the congregation gathered just outside and continuing to pray. But on this day, as Zechariah was offering the incense, an angel appeared beside the altar, startling him. He was more than just momentarily startled. The word Luke uses here is *tarassó,* which literally means "to tremble with fear." Zechariah was utterly terrified, shaking in fear at the appearance of God's messenger.

It is a well-documented phenomenon throughout the Bible that when angels show up, they frighten the people they visit. Now, I have never actually *seen* an angel, at least not in the messenger-of-God way. I'm guessing most of us haven't. Perhaps angels do not have the serene, gentle countenance we imagine in artistic renderings. They might be terrifying to look at. Or perhaps it is just the suddenness of their appearance that evokes a fearful response. Regardless, the first thing every angel says when they appear is, "Do not be afraid."

That's exactly what the angel said to Zechariah. And yet, unlike others who receive an angelic visit, Zechariah might have been expecting something. We can imagine Zechariah praying for God to intervene, perhaps even at the moment he was burning incense. Life was hard, and they needed help – if not for them personally, then for the people. But when God answered, Zechariah's response was neither relief nor joy. He was *terrified*. Though the angel was able to calm Zechariah enough to speak with him, the sense of calm was short-lived. The news the angel came to bring was that God had chosen Zechariah and Elizabeth to be the means through which God's inbreaking presence would begin. They were going to have a child who would grow up to be the messenger who prepared the way for Jesus.

Remember, Zechariah and Elizabeth were advanced in years. Any thought they once had of having children had long since passed. They had come to terms with that. They had settled into a life with just the two of them. As wonderful as it would be to welcome a child into their lives, it was also a daunting prospect. Imagine the thoughts running through Zechariah's mind: *Are we*

too old to become parents? Can Elizabeth handle a pregnancy at this stage of her life, let alone give birth safely? What will become of our child if something were to happen to us?

Though the story of Advent is a story about hope, it is first a story about fear. Fear is present at every turn in this story: fear of the Roman occupation, the intense fear of an angel's sudden appearance, fear of raising a child in old age, fear of what change might mean.

Though we are living in a very different time, we recognize that fear is all around us. Wars rage around the world, either from invasion or civil war, in Sudan, Ukraine, Guinea-Bissau, Haiti, Armenia and Azerbaijan, Gaza, Somalia, and Congo. Venezuelan civilians are being targeted and executed without any legal process. Immigrants in this country are being demonized and rounded up by aggressive and often unidentified agents, then whisked away to detention centers far from loved ones or resources that can help. Food and other expenses continue to rise, while many of our neighbors face steep reductions in benefits. Healthcare costs skyrocket while Medicare subsidies are slashed. We are facing a mental health crisis as demand rises at a higher rate than providers can manage, leaving many at risk, especially teenagers and young adults. Economic desperation and easy access to guns increases incidents of violence. Our public education system struggles to meet the needs of children with a wide range of learning accommodations, while also facing diminished parental involvement and constant attack by state legislators, who are quick with criticism but short on solutions. Fear might be personal for you. How will we afford college for our kids? Have I saved enough for retirement? Is this pain just a temporary inconvenience, or is it a sign of a more serious condition? What will happen to my loved ones when I'm no longer here to provide for them?

In John 14:27, Jesus said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." Don't be *troubled* or *afraid*. Both words relate to fear. The first is *tarassó,* the same word used to describe Zechariah when the angel appeared. The second is *deiliaó,* which means fear that shrinks the heart or diminishes courage. Fear can be intense when it is a response to a situation or an event. But fear can also settle in and take root, becoming a part of us. Once it does, it can be hard to shake. We can begin to lose hope or any expectation that things can be different. We might start to settle for a lesser existence. We can even form an attachment to fear as part of our identity: not only do we come to think of fear as inevitable; any change in the status quo induces more fear. "Better the devil you know than the one you don't."

But this isn't how God wants us to live. God broke into our world in Jesus to challenge the fear and the hopelessness we experience. That's good news. But that Good News is even better, because God's inbreaking isn't just something that happened once upon a time; it is *what God does* again and again and again, in countless stories in scripture and across time, coming to us in the midst of fear and transforming our hope. God has come in Christ, and is with us still, journeying with us in our struggle and pain and fear, pointing the way to what is possible. And if, right now, you are struggling to summon faith enough to see that, then you should know that others around you are here to lift you up. We are on this journey together, holding faith for one another when the fear is too great to overcome.

But hope comes with a disclaimer. Or, at least, it should. Because if what we're hoping for is for things to be just a little bit better, or for them to go back to the way they were before, we are in for a shock. When God enters in, things change. God's inbreaking disrupts our world, our reality, our lives. That disruption might actually increase our anxiety or even introduce a new fear, thought it is only temporary. When God chose to begin a new story through Zechariah and Elizabeth, they were afraid. But there was also joy. Through them, hope was reborn. *There is no birth without pain.*

What do you fear? What keeps you awake at night? What holds you back from being truly free? Is your fear something you can name, or is it a generalized anxiety? Can you imagine something better? Even now, where might God be showing up, breaking into the life you *have* to invite you to a *life greater*? Hope does not come from wishful thinking or vain aspirations. Our hope comes from the God who shows up, again and again, just when we need God most.

> It hovers in dark corners
> before the lights are turned on,
> it shakes sleep from its eyes
> and drops from mushroom gills,
> it explodes in the starry heads
> of dandelions turned sages,
> it sticks to the wings of green angels
> that sail from the tops of maples.
> It sprouts in each occluded eye
> of the many-eyed potato,
> it lives in each earthworm segment
> surviving cruelty,
> it is the motion that runs
> from the eyes to the tail of a dog,
> it is the mouth that inflates the lungs
> of the child that has just been born.
> It is the singular gift
> we cannot destroy in ourselves,
> the argument that refutes death,
> the genius that invents the future,
> all we know of God.
> It is the serum which makes us swear
> not to betray one another;
> it is in this poem, trying to speak.[1] Amen.