

Scripture Reading
Luke 1: 5-25, 57-80

Advent 1: "Make Ready a People: #morehope"

Have you ever had a moment in your life after which you knew nothing would ever be the same? Maybe a day like Zechariah had in today's reading. For Zechariah it was just another day at the temple. It was his priestly turn to make sure everything was done properly and in good order. But it turned into something quite different when an angel showed up at the altar.

In the midst of great change, hope is always a welcome thing. Advent can remind us that God makes us ready for whatever unknown may come our way and calls us to be messengers of #morehope in an ever-changing world. The season of Advent for many kicks off the anticipation and excitement of the holiday season. The fresh start of a new year is supposed to be full of hope and anticipation, eagerness and excitement. And for many of us including myself it does bring that sense of anticipation and promise. Yet at the same time, it feels like a growing darkness is descending upon us. The days are getting shorter and the nights longer, and blacker. And wetter. And just as the physical darkness is growing, so too is the metaphorical darkness: last year Rev. Debra Bowen wrote on this first advent "over the last year it feels like the lid of Pandora's box has been flipped open and a miasma of mean-spiritedness, racism, fear of the other, and economic disparity is swirling through the air. We're in danger of going backwards in efforts to protect the climate. Gun violence and terrorism occur with such regularity we have trouble tracking the atrocities. Whole cultures are being decimated. Our fears span from an immediate concern for our children and grandchildren, to enormous fears for the survival of the planet. And of course these fears are completely intertwined.

Traditionally, Advent Scripture readings begin with such a time as this: with end times, with cosmic struggles between good and evil. All this fear and uncertainty is named before one starts with the good news stories of a manger and a virgin mother. And throughout these stories of end times and of new beginnings, there is one consistent character – the angel.

There are the angels in Revelation, in the vision of the end of days: "Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, singing with full voice,..." (Rev. 5:11) And there are the angels who announce the tidings of great joy: the angel who appeared before Zechariah telling him he would have a son, and the angel Gabriel who came to Mary. The great host of angels who appeared to the shepherds on the evening of Jesus's birth, and the lone angel who warned Joseph to flee with his family to Egypt, and then some years later, to return again to Israel.

In each of these stories, it is the angels who get things rolling. It is the angels who offer comfort and courage in the midst of great upheaval. 'Do not be afraid' is almost always their opening

line. Do not be afraid in the times in which you are living. Do not be afraid as we bring God's word to you about how to live into these times as children of God. Do not be afraid, let us teach you to fly in the face of fear.

As with the candles on the Advent wreath, the angels remind us that even as the nights get longer, even as darkness descends, we are not alone. God's light and hope accompany us, growing brighter and stronger even as the darkness increases. So we are invited, this Advent, to make our journey to Bethlehem in the company of the angels. To move in their company from a time of fear and despair, into courage and hope.

Advent is known as a season of "waiting" - for the Christ child to be born anew in our hearts, for God to "create a new heaven and a new earth" and for Christ to come again and the reign of God come to this world.

But the "waiting" theme can have its problems too. As Rhonda Britten describes it in her book *Fearless Living*, "when we passively wait, we are living in fear." What she is referring to is that when we wait for circumstances outside of ourselves to change in order to feel hope, peace, joy or love or to live our lives fully, we rob ourselves of the chance to have those things right now. Cultivating those things means we accept and claim our agency to make our lives our own and move freely into the future no matter the circumstances of our lives or the world around us. And when we do that, we are living fully into who God calls us to be because we have the power to make a difference—to help shift circumstances—rather than live in fear of them.

So... the "waiting" in Advent cannot be a passive waiting—the kind of waiting that believes that God doesn't need us in order to make the world a safer, better place for all people. This is the message that the angels who appear to Zechariah, Mary, Joseph and the shepherds bring to us. They bring news, yes. But they also invite participation in the story. The message is "God is doing this..." and "you are a part of it." Get over your fear because God is in need of you. And in order for all this to happen, we are going to need more hope, more peace, more joy, more love and more life all around. God needs you to spread that word.

There was a reason why angels always said, "Do not be afraid," because their appearance "surprised-the-you-know-what" out of those who crossed their path. They were a wake-up call and came with life-altering messages. I think "do not be afraid" was both immanent ("don't be afraid" right now while you are quaking in your boots because I'm here) and prophetic ("don't be afraid" as you set out to fulfill what God is calling you to do and be).

The English word "Angel" comes from the Latin *angelus* derived from the Greek translation. The term initially only pointed to a function—that of a messenger. But gradually "angel" came to signify a name for a class of "beings" existing between God and humanity and thus began a whole lot of "angelology" and theological speculation through the ages and certainly continues in popular notions about angels today.

Angels are a whole lot more than the cute figuring with beautiful golden white wings that is portrayed in today's simplified images. Angels can be fearsome and they can be comforting. They can be enormous and daunting, or they can be still, quiet voices that come to us in dreams. Our culture often domesticates angels – rather than ephemeral and awe-inspiring they can be portrayed as kitschy and common.

We start our Advent journey with Zechariah and Elizabeth. They are both from priestly families, sort of the upper class of Jewish society. They have lived a long time together, this aged couple, and have not been able to bear children. They live their lives through priestly service to God alone.

When Zechariah goes up to Jerusalem to serve at the Temple, he is also chosen by God to enter the sanctuary, the court closest to the Holy of Holies. It is in this sanctuary where God's presence was believed to be the strongest and most powerful. To enter the sanctuary and burn the incense on the holy altar was a tremendous privilege and a terrifying honour, a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

As Zechariah went into the sanctuary and lit the incense, crowds of people waited outside, men and women, Jews and even Gentiles, all who wanted to worship the God of Israel, all outside, praying, trusting that their prayers would be carried up to God in the smoke of the incense. Suddenly, Zechariah was not alone; there was another presence with him. The presence was overwhelming, even terrifying, and its first words were: "Do not be afraid". This mysterious presence, this messenger from God, goes on to say, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard."

And what prayer was that? Maybe he prayed for children, for boys to continue the priestly line, dedicating their lives to the service of God; and for girls to care for them in their old age. That is often what is suggested as the content of Zechariah's prayers. But maybe he prayed, as many of us do, that in some way his life could contribute to the fulfillment of the kingdom of God. Maybe, as many of us do, he asked that he might in some way make a difference to God's world. Whatever his prayer, it was answered. Zechariah and Elizabeth would have a child, and that child would herald a cosmic change in history.

This promised child was to be named John, the angel announced, and he would be filled with the Holy Spirit, and would turn many people of Israel back to the God of their ancestors. He would be a prophet like the ones of old, a prophet like Elijah, calling the disobedient back to the righteous ways of God. He would be the one to prepare the people of Israel for the long awaited Messiah, the longed for liberator and leader who would overthrow the Roman occupiers.

To Zechariah's incredulous "but I am old" "How can I possibly believe you?" comes Gabriel's "but I am Gabriel!" (Who can argue with that?) Perhaps Zechariah's "but..." is an analogy to what must be God's frustration with our cynical responses to God's call... "but... I'm not good enough" or "what can one person do?" Gabriel says "It's not yours to doubt" Hear the good news "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God and I have been sent to you to give you this good news." In other words "Because I said so," said Gabriel.

The angel appearance is the breaking in of the divine into ordinary life. The appearance of an angel signals that this is an extraordinary story of divine events and yet it is set in the midst of very ordinary people. The message is that one person can, and does, make a difference no matter how insignificant our contribution seems. God is calling us to become a people ready to be messengers of hope through our words and actions.

It seems in today's story that Zechariah is punished for his doubt. As the messenger Gabriel leaves so does Zechariah's ability to speak. He is made silent until his child is born. Zechariah is full to overflowing with an incredible holy and mystical experience, an experience of intense intimacy with God – and no words to share it with anybody.

Perhaps, though, the silence was as much a gift as it was a punishment.

Have you ever had a time that God (or God's messenger) came so close to you, or you came so close to God, that it was overwhelming? And not just overwhelming, but mysterious, and difficult to describe?

Has your life ever seemed on the brink of some enormous, life-altering transformation, so big and deep that you could hardly put words to it, but only hold it in your heart and wait for it to settle into you?

Maybe the only appropriate response to experiences like this is, in fact, silence. The silence of waiting; of pondering on what has happened and is happening; of reflecting on the staggering reality of God doing something unimaginably new in the world; of preparing for its advent, its arrival, in our lives.

I wonder if Zechariah's silence is another clue for us to find our way to Bethlehem this Advent. I wonder if silence is an essential practice in finding the way to new hope. It seems counter-intuitive, doesn't it? When we are feeling our way in the darkness, of our lives, of our world, we are tempted to rush quickly through, making as much noise and clattering as possible, to drive away anything dangerous, to try to overcome our fear and despair with noise and busyness.

It is much harder to take our time, to walk slowly and quietly through the darkness and doubt, waiting to see what it will tell us. It can be hard, to stop talking so much, to stop rushing through our lives, trying to fix everything that is broken; to stop the chatter of avoidance and the denial of the darkness in the world and in our lives. To simply be and see what the quiet has to teach us.

It can be hard, but it can also, according to the story of Zechariah, be incredibly life-giving. This Advent may you, may we, take time to listen for the angels in our lives. Those of the ephemeral heavenly hosts, and those rooted right next to you. May you be touched with the faint brush of a feather as the messenger of God passes you by. And may you settle in for coffee with the Angels at your side, hearing of hope rooted in faith, new life rooted in Christ.

How will we know this is possible? An angel told us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Throughout our Advent series, we will be using feathers as an “anchor image” (symbol of the main message).

“Angels are sometimes portrayed in the scriptures, and certainly in religious art throughout history, as having wings. Just as angels are symbols of God’s messages to us, as God’s presence with us, feathers symbolize the Spirit of God, the ability to span any distance between heaven and earth, and the freedom of flight to new heights in our lives as we claim God’s possibilities for our lives and for our world. This season we invite you to place this feather in your pocket, on your key ring or school bag—some place where you will be reminded to keep your eyes open to God’s messengers in your life and also God’s power to be a messenger of hope in the midst of each day, in encounters with each person you meet. As you come for communion this morning, we invite you to receive this gift.”