

The angel says what angels always say to frightened human beings: “Do not be afraid” (1:13). The angel reassures Zechariah: “Your prayer has been heard!” What prayer? The earnest prayer of a couple who want a child. “Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John” (1:13). Then the angel sweetens the deal. “He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord...he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God...to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (1:14-17). Those are spectacular promises that any parent would be thrilled to hear about their child.

Zechariah, trying to make sense of this, asks the angel: “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years” (1:18). Zechariah is afraid to hope! He desperately wants the good news the angel offers to be true, but experience has taught him not to hope for too much or to set his hopes too high. He asks a legitimate question, “How can this be?” He knows that an old man and a wife “well along in years” do not typically have children. It’s a fair, honest, searching question. It is the question of a man who is afraid to hope that this could be true.

The angel’s answer reminds Zechariah from where his hope truly comes. “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news” (1:20). This divine messenger received this good news directly from God. This promise of a child comes straight from the mouth of God to Zechariah’s ears. But even as his ears hear the words, Zechariah’s heart is afraid to hope. He cannot bear to be disappointed again. He cannot bear to see his wife in tears any longer. He cannot bear to anticipate such a tremendous thing, which does not happen to a man his age. He cannot bear to believe that this time things will be different. He cannot bear to summon the strength to hope for this wonderful thing. Being afraid to hope is a terrible, awful, soul-crushing experience.

In the movie, *The Shawshank Redemption*, one of the characters, Red (played by Morgan Freeman) is afraid to hope. Red is in his sixties. Imprisoned for over forty years for murdering his wife. Red has no hope of parole, no hope for a life outside the prison yard, no hope of redemption of any kind. He is utterly resigned to his life as an inmate. He is beaten down by circumstances which are out of his control, and it is just easier to go along to get along. To protect his heart and his sanity, Red refuses to hope. He is afraid to hope.

Like Red, Zechariah is afraid to hope. Gabriel understands Zechariah’s predicament. He knows, too, that it is Zechariah’s fear that is shutting down his hope. Which is why Gabriel tells Zechariah, “And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at the appointed time” (1:20). Gabriel’s words are incredibly significant here. Zechariah’s fearfulness would not stop the child from coming “at the appointed time.” God would fulfill God’s purpose with or without Zechariah’s help or hope. Our fear cannot stop God.

God fulfilled God’s promise. Elizabeth conceived and bore a son, and the couple named him John. His parents rejoiced at his birth. Elizabeth said, “The Lord has done this for me...In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people” (1:25). Their hope restored, Zechariah and Elizabeth praised God and shared their good news of God’s promises with others. Their son, John, did indeed, grow great in the sight of the Lord, and as an adult, John preached a gospel of repentance which prepared people for the coming of the promised Messiah, Jesus. God delivered on God’s promises. Zechariah and Elizabeth’s fear-of-hope did not stop God from achieving great things.

Are you ever afraid to hope? Afraid to hope when the diagnosis is dreadful? Afraid to hope that the world we leave our kids will be better? Afraid to hope for a decent retirement as the economy stalls? Afraid to hope that the pandemic will end? Afraid to hope that racial injustice will ever be resolved? Afraid to hope that we can save the environment? Afraid to hope that our kids will grow up right? Afraid to hope that life, in general, will get better? So many fears stealing our hope!

Susie Miller was afraid to hope after a drunk driver totaled her Volvo wagon and injured her so severely that she spent weeks in the hospital. Susie remembers the paramedic telling her, “It’s going to be okay, God and Volvo saved your life.” The damage to her body was so severe that the goal for the first six weeks of rehab was simply for her to stand up straight. This was devastating to Susie, a runner and mother of three young kids. Susie says, “Hope didn’t float – it landed with a dull thud as I looked at my prognosis and future.”

Anxiety, depression, sorrow, loss, grief, struggle, failure, and dire circumstances conspired to steal Susie’s hope. She found herself shutting down, thinking it “wiser, more realistic or even more mature” to give up the foolishness of hope. She admits that “hope is terrifying because it opens us up to disappointment, and I would rather avoid that, thank you very much!” But she also confesses that “hope is necessary, maybe not essential like oxygen, but it’s up there with water and chocolate for life to be rich and fulfilling.”

Proverbs 29:18 tells us that “without hope or vision, the people perish.” We get it. Little by little dreams die, relationships deteriorate, life becomes stale. We may feel safe and buffered in our bubble of control, but we are not fully living. Life without hope may shield us from disappointment, but it robs us of so much more. Hope fuels all our creative and life-giving efforts. Hope inspires us to engage, risk, dream, try, and try again! Hope changes us, opens us, motivates us.

Hope is grounded in possibility...not what we can achieve, but what God can make possible *in* and *through* and *for* us. When Zechariah and Elizabeth were afraid to hope, God delivered on the promise of a child. When Red was afraid to hope, the parole board gave him a new lease on life. When Susie Miller was afraid to hope, she learned to walk again, and then to run. Which is why Susie Miller says she is now a “possibilitarian.” She is an “all in, pedal to the metal, there’s a pony in here somewhere...kind of hoper!”

With God, all things are possible. Zechariah and Elizabeth were childless so that in God’s good time, God could fulfill God’s promise through this righteous, devout, God-fearing couple. “The days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will fulfill the good promise I made to the people of Israel and Judah. ‘In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David’s line; he will do what is just and right in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. This is the name by which it will be called: The LORD Our Righteous Savior” (Jeremiah 33:14-16). In Jesus Christ, God took a decisive step to change the trajectory of this world, to right its wrongs, to restore hope.

Life overflows with things we cannot control, circumstances that can derail us, failures at work, home, and in relationships. We can, however, control our response to ups and downs of life. We can **HOPE: Hold** fast to the belief that God who promises is faithful (Hebrews 10:23); **Open** ourselves to the working of God’s Holy Spirit in and through us; **Pray** for what terrifies and concerns us; and **Encourage** one another. We can choose to awaken our hope and allow it to move us forward: afraid, knees knocking, heart racing, but forward, nonetheless. Every morning, our prayer must be, “With God, I Hope...”

Prayer: Hope-Giving God, I ask you to give me your hope. Show me what your hope looks like, and how I can have it in my life. Give me faith to believe that with you all things are possible. Walk beside me on this path, help me in my suffering, fill me with hopefulness instead of hopelessness. In the name and for the sake of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Source: Susie Miller. “Are You Afraid to Hope?” www.susiemiller.com/hope. Retrieved November 18, 2021.

Afraid to Hope

First Sunday of Advent, November 28, 2021
Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Jeremiah 33:14-16
Luke 1:5-25

“Hope sees the invisible, feels the intangible, and achieves the impossible,” said Helen Keller. Which sounds great, right? Nothing is as attractive as the possibility of hope. Nothing is as life changing as the motivation of hope. Nothing is more transformative than a heart filled with hope. But what if hope is nothing more than a faint flicker? What if all hope seems lost? What if the odds are so against you that hope isn’t enough to turn things around? What does it mean when you find yourself afraid to hope?

This is where we find Zechariah and Elizabeth in our story this morning: afraid to hope. Zechariah is a priest of God. He and his wife are both descendants of Aaron, the brother of Moses, and part of the priestly tribe. They are faithful in serving God and, according to Luke, “righteous in the sight of God” (1:6) They obey God’s commands follow God’s decrees, and no one can fault them for anything. Except that they are childless.

Now, that may not sound like the end of the world, but to Zechariah and Elizabeth, this is a source of great shame. Elizabeth calls it a “disgrace” (1:25). Ancient cultures considered any misfortune a source of divine disapproval; and being childless topped the list! So, what did Zechariah and Elizabeth do to irritate God? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Luke is very clear that this couple is devout and virtuous, role models in the Jewish community.

The only thing negative we might say about Zechariah and Elizabeth is that they are afraid to hope. But really, who could blame them? They desperately wanted children but couldn’t have them. Elizabeth is “not able to conceive” and both are now “very old” (1:7). They accepted their childlessness, and just got on with living. Not much hope of the situation changing, so best to make the most of it. Right?

Then, one day, when Zechariah was on duty serving God in the Temple, an angel of the Lord appeared to him. Luke tells us that Zechariah was alone, inside the temple, while the assembled congregation worshipped outside. So, no one saw or heard the angel, except Zechariah. When Zechariah saw the angel, “he was startled and gripped with fear” (1:12). Which makes sense. If a cosmic being suddenly showed up in your living room, you would probably be surprised and terrified too, right?