

**More Hope**  
**November 27, 2022 – Advent 1**  
**Luke 1 – Angels Among Us Series**  
**Rev. Laurie Crelly, East Church**  
**Grand Rapids MI**

There once was this person who had committed a crime and was sent to the king for his punishment. The king told him he had a choice of two punishments. He could be hung by a rope or take what's behind the big, dark, scary, iron door. The criminal quickly decided on the rope. As the noose was being slipped on him, he turned to the king and asked. "By the way, out of curiosity, what's behind that door?" The king laughed and said: "You know, it's funny, I offer everyone the same choice, and nearly everyone picks the rope." "So," said the criminal, "tell me. What's behind the door? I mean, obviously, I won't tell anyone," He said, pointing to the noose around his neck.

The king paused then answered, "Freedom, but it seems most people are so afraid of the unknown that they immediately take the rope." This story by Karen Salmansohn and her Blog Not Salmon expresses the danger of allowing fear to control our lives. Fear is really a gate keeper of our comfort zone, trying to protect us from the unknown. The criminal in this story chose what he could see, rather than take the risk to open the unknown door. Even when we dream of a different world and, like Zecharias and Elizabeth did, praying our whole lives for that dream, our fear can be the undoing of our own dreams.

Zecharias experienced several types of fear that day. The FIRST fear he experienced was the one of absolute terror and dread. To have this marvelous and scary supernatural being appear in the room with him brought terror. We are often taught to fear God as a form of reverence. Zecharias also was taught to be afraid of God, especially in the Holiest of Holies. Being in the presence of God was seen as dangerous for the priest. This was reinforced by a rope just in case God struck down

an unworthy person entering into God's holy presence. If they were killed by God's holiness, others needed a way to pull the body back out. So, I can imagine that Zecharias thought that was the reason for the angel's appearance. He had learned to be afraid of God's appearance.

Immediately the Angel tries to reassure him that he comes bearing good news.

"Zecharias, do not be afraid, for your prayers have been heard by God and you and Elizabeth will be parents." Here the angel quickly assures him that an Angelic presence was a sign of something good, not bad. How many of us fear the idea of being in God's presence, fear that seeing God means judgment rather than blessing and acceptance of us. Many of us are taught to fear God's wrath more than God's blessings.

The SECOND fear Zecharias feels is one of inadequacy. His head fills with all kinds of doubts of whether he is up for the task. I imagine the dialogue in his head "Why me? Am I really worthy of this? I cannot be as great as Abraham, Isaac or Jacob. All their wives suffered from barrenness and God heard their prayers. But I don't think I measure up to the giants of the faith." He hears all of the amazing things his son will do for God, and he questions why he is the chosen father.

We have experienced that kind of fear, right? Am I good enough? Can I do this? Why am I the lucky one? This kind of fear holds us back. We fear failure of some kind. We fear that we will somehow blow it, that we really are not the right person, someone has made a mistake in choosing us. This kind of fear leads Zecharias to the question – "How do I know this is for real? What is the sign to confirm this?" His THIRD fear looks at his future and doubting the hope that this new future holds. He is really fearing what is behind the door. Can good really be possible? Sometimes we do that too. We see the possibility of an answer to our prayers, but our fear of the unknown causes us to sabotage the future, deep down we feel more secure by staying the way we are, than stepping through that door into the true freedom of our dreams becoming a reality.

Zecharias, when he is standing on the threshold of answered prayer basically says, he doesn't really want the baby now. Maybe he is too old? He still can't believe his dreams are coming true.

What more proof did Zecharias need than a big scary angel standing in front of him? The Angel though sees through his doubts and fears and says "here is the real sign for you, silence." "Be still and know I am God" kind of silence. Silent observance of God at work to build his trust and faith in something greater than his fear.

This phrase, "DO NOT BE AFRAID" is the common thread in all these Angelic encounters we are looking at during Advent. It can be hard sometimes to face our fears but let us draw hope from today's story that we can face our fears knowing that God hears us and is with us. God wants to fulfill our prayers for a future that is full of hope, not fear. Let us pray for more hope in ourselves. Let us pray for more hope in our world. And most of all let us pray for more hope in God.