What Do You Fear?

In the Time of Herod, We Long For God To Break In.

First Sunday in Advent

Luke 1:5-13 Lamentations 3:55-57 *Rev. Todd B. Freeman*
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa *November 30, 2025*

This year's Advent resource material from A Sanctified Art asks and reflects upon the question: **What do you fear?** It goes on to inspire us to have hope even in and through those fears. It reminds me of the line in the Christmas Carol, O Little Town of Bethlehem, "the hopes and fears of all the years."

What were some of the fears around the time of Jesus' birth? Our resource material puts in into perspective this way. "Luke's Gospel begins the story of Jesus with this opening line: "In the time of Herod…" This detail may seem minor to modern readers, however, it reveals layers of information about **the fearful world Jesus entered, one filled with rampant oppression, economic disparity, uncertainty, and instability. A world not so unlike our own**. And yet, throughout the stories of Christ's birth, the whispers of angels deliver a surprising message: "Do not fear." In our own time, we might ask: is it even possible to be fearless in a fearful world? When Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, and the magi are each called into God's redemptive story, they do not deny their fears—they move through them. They ask questions, hold fast to courage, trust in good news, and say, "Here I am, Lord." **When we find ourselves in fearful times, can we acknowledge our fears while also insisting on hope?**"

Resource biblical commentator, the Rev. Dr. Boyung Lee writes: ""In the time of Herod…" (Luke 1:5) With these words, Luke's Gospel grounds the birth of Jesus in a world shaped by violence, occupation, and fear. This was no golden age of peace or spiritual clarity—it was a time of survival under empire. Herod, the Roman-appointed ruler of Judea, governed with paranoia and cruelty. His power, secured through imperial alliance, was maintained by coercion, surveillance, and brutality. **Luke situates the story of Jesus within these political realities. His Gospel is not only spiritual but political—resistance in the face of empire**.

"Amid this context, Luke introduces Zechariah and Elizabeth—an aging priestly couple not marked by prominence, but by longing. They had no child. In their time, barrenness was often interpreted as divine judgment. Elizabeth's childlessness brought not just personal grief but public shame. Yet, Luke insists: they were righteous. Their faith endured, even in waiting. It's tempting to rush ahead to the angel's announcement and the joy of John's birth – the boy who would become John the Baptist. But Luke slows us down, inviting us to notice the interruption.

"While offering incense in the temple, Zechariah encounters a divine messenger. His response is not relief or joy—but fear. Luke uses the Greek verb *tarassó*—to be troubled, disturbed, or agitated. This is no fleeting startle. It evokes deep inner shaking, a disruption of body and spirit." *Tarassó* is the soul's recoil from the unexpected, the

mind's clamor in the face of uncertainty, the body's trembling at the threshold of something it cannot control. Fear, in this context, is not failure. It is a natural human response to divine disruption. But fear can become more than a reaction. It can take root and become a way of being. In John 14:27, Jesus says, "Let not your hearts be troubled (*tarassó*), and do not be afraid (*deiliaó*)." The second term, *deiliaó*, implies a shrinking of heart, our spirit—a fear that inhibits action and diminishes courage. Together, these words describe fear that doesn't just visit—it settles. Fear that shapes our posture toward the world. Many of us know this kind of fear.

"Especially in "Herodian times"—eras marked by empire, oppression, and uncertainty—fear becomes embedded in our bodies, relationships, and public discourse. It becomes background noise so constant we forget it's there. Like Zechariah, we may grow so used to disappointment that when hope finally arrives, it startles us. When God interrupts, we flinch. So when the angel says, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard," it is not a dismissal. It is a reorientation. **Your fear is real—but it is not the only truth**. God has already been listening. God enters the silence, the ache, the barrenness—into the very place where fear has taken root. And God's response begins not with a miracle, but with recognition: your prayer has been heard. This is a word for all of us in Advent.

"**In a season of waiting, we are not asked to suppress fear but to face it**. To ask: How does fear live in me? What voices has it amplified? What longings has it silenced? Fear, as trauma theologians remind us, "In the time of Herod…" can be a teacher. It is the voice of our vulnerability asking not to be erased, but acknowledged. Advent gives us room to sit with fear—not to banish it, but to listen. **What are we afraid to hope for? What have we stopped praying for? Where has fear caused us to shrink back?** Zechariah's fear doesn't disqualify him. It marks the beginning of transformation. Even in his silence, he becomes part of the unfolding story—his life bearing witness to a God who hears, disrupts, and enters fearful places with grace.

"**In the time of Herod…" the world was loud with empire's threats, echoing with grief and longing. And still – God broke in. In the time of fear, God heard a prayer. And responded with presence.** This Advent, perhaps the question is not how we rid ourselves of fear. Perhaps the deeper invitation is this: **Can we name our fear honestly—and still believe God is near?"**

What do you fear? What do you hope for in and through that fear? Like Zechariah and Elizabeth, perhaps we come to realize that many of our fears show up as longing. **Like a deep ache inside us, we long for a better world, a different story, a brighter future. As we sit with our longings, we long for God to break in. That is our hope this Advent.**

Amen.

Resource:
A Sanctified Art, Advent 2025.