

Text: Luke 1:13-20. Midweek Advent. **December 11, 2014.**

Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Amen.

Ah, the holidays. So much laughter, happiness. Relaxing, stress-free days. Just looking forward and counting the days. Two more weeks until Christmas. What a happy time! At least that's what the commercials would have you believe and maybe that's the façade you are supposed to put on. But let's be honest here. I'm afraid as Christmas gets closer. I'm afraid. The national unemployment rate is down, but locally it's still 100%. I have a job, but I'm afraid I won't next year. I'm afraid. Mom is really sick. This might be the last holidays she's with us. I'm afraid I won't be able to look forward to Christmas if she's not around. I'm afraid. I have so many decisions to make and I'm so young. These decisions will affect the rest of my life. I'm afraid I'm going to make the wrong decision!

If you are afraid, then the message of God's angels is for you. Do not be afraid. It's like the first thing angels always say. To Zechariah. Do not be afraid. To Joseph. Do not be afraid. To Mary. Do not be afraid. To the shepherds. Do not be afraid. Why not? I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. A Savior has been born to you. Do not be afraid. You have a Savior. Do not be afraid. Your sins are forgiven. Do not be afraid. Jesus came to wear your skin to take away your sin. Jesus took care of your biggest problem. Jesus will take care of all the other problems as well. Do not be afraid.

Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth had some reason to be afraid. They were childless. This is before test tubes and surrogates and people really understood that God gave children. If you didn't have children, God must have it out for you. Yeah Zechariah was a priest and yeah they observed the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly, but still. Maybe God doesn't really love us. I mean, he isn't answering our prayers for a child. And now Elizabeth is too old. That time has passed. Our prayers were not heard.

Not so fast, Zechariah! Gabriel comes! God's angel stands right before Zechariah, right in the temple, right as he is offering incense. And doesn't the Bible say, "my prayers go up like incense"? Gabriel, God's mighty messenger, brings good news. Do not be afraid! Your prayer has been heard. God has been listening to you all these years. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son! A son!

And not just any son. John. That name means the Lord is gracious. Gracious indeed! He will be a triple joy. A joy. A delight. Many will rejoice. We are still rejoicing today at his birth, over 2000 years later. Wow!

The greatest joy John will bring is because of the work he will do. He will make ready a people prepared for the Lord, getting people fully ready, completely outfitted for the promised Savior to come. As a priest, Zechariah had not only been praying for a son, Zechariah had been praying for salvation, rescue from sin, to come from God's promised Savior. Zechariah's son, John, was going to get people ready for that Savior. John would be special, set apart, not filled with wine, but filled with the Spirit, not living an ordinary life, but living an extraordinary life in service to God, carrying out a great work.

This work would not be easy. Turning hearts from sin is never an easy task. Bringing back people to God is something my own sinful nature always resists. Now consider how terrible things were. The hearts of parents were not set on loving their children. Even the most basic, human love, even a love that people without Jesus show, was not common. Hearts of parents had to be turned back to their children. The disobedient had to be turned back to the mindset of the righteous.

God had to work a change even in the heart of Zechariah. Here he was a priest, in the temple, chosen by God to offer incense on behalf of all the people. He receives good news from God's own angel, an answer to a prayer that he and his wife have been praying for decades. It's joy, delight, rejoicing! But not for Zechariah. He's too scared, too gripped with fear. He can't believe it. How can I be sure of this? I'm old. My wife is well along in years. That's about as nicely as I can say it.

It's hard to imagine. A priest! In the temple! Offering incense! An angel brings good news! And he doesn't believe! How can I be sure of this? How can I be sure of this? Here I am a pastor! In church! Preaching a sermon! What if an angel appeared? What would I say? What would I believe? What about you? Here you are. A Christian (God calls you all priests by the way.) In worship! At a special Advent service! God's messenger is bringing you good news! What do you believe? How can I be sure of this? An old lady is going to have a baby? Sounds like a fairy tale. Wait till next week. It's going to be a virgin. Really? A virgin had a baby? How can I be sure of this? And that baby is God, lying in a manger? How can I be sure of this? And this Bible is all true, with dying and rising from the dead, I'd like to see that and ascending into heaven? Really? How can I be sure of this?

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. I'm not Gabriel. But I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. Your sins are forgiven. Do not be afraid. Your sins of fear are forgiven. Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid about your job. Jesus will take care of you. His nail-pierced hands prove it. Do not be afraid about where your Christian mother is. She's in Jesus' nail-pierced hands now and her grave will be as empty as Jesus' grave is. Do not be afraid. How can I be sure? Jesus put his body on the cross. Jesus put his blood on boards. Jesus puts that body in your mouth. Jesus puts that blood down your throat. How much more sure can you be? Your sins are forgiven! Jesus put his water and his Word on your head. There's your sure and certain sign. Your sins are forgiven. Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid.

I think we would agree that God has given us better signs to make us sure than he gave to Zechariah. He was not able to speak for almost a whole year until John was born. He probably wasn't able to hear either. So the ears that heard God's Word and refused to believe were closed and the mouth that spoke the words of disbelief were closed as well.

But Zechariah's refusal to believe did not stop God's Word from coming true. The seeming impossibility did not make it impossible for God. God's Word came true. John was born at the appointed time. He was a joy, a delight. Many rejoiced at his birth. John made ready a people prepared for the Lord.

This account has another happy ending. It involves Zechariah. God's Word from God's angel overcame his doubts. God's good news from Gabriel trumped Zechariah's fears. When the sign was fulfilled and John was born, Zechariah spoke again. He talked not so much about his son John, but much more about God's rescue from our sin. Zechariah spoke about serving God without fear. Without fear. Gone was the fear of seeing God's angel. Gone was the fear of God's punishment. Now there is John. And soon there would be Jesus. Now there is a messenger. He has been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news: Do not be afraid. Your sins are forgiven. Do not be afraid. Amen.