

"More Hope"
First Sunday of Advent
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Edina Morningside Community Church; November 26, 2017

Luke 1:5-25,57-66

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years. Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." Zechariah said to the angel, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur." Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. When his time of service was ended, he went to his home. After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, "This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people."

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, "No; he is to be called John." They said to her, "None of your relatives has this name." Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, "What then will this child become?" For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

By January of my senior year in high school, there was so much to be afraid of. I was approaching graduation and should have been looking forward to college, but all I could think about was how I didn't fit in, and my fear that I would *never* fit in. For years I'd known that something was different about me; I didn't match the cultural expectations of my surroundings in Great Falls, Montana. Months earlier, I'd finally dared to name the difference: I was having crushes on men rather than women. But this realization brought no comfort—it set off waves of daily, fervent prayer. Admitting I was gay would make me a target for bullying at school, would cost me relationships with family members and classmates, and

would not fly at all in the church where I'd become a youth leader. So night after night I prayed for change, but the change never came. I feared I would *always* be as I was then—confused, hidden and alone.

One Saturday night in January 2001 I again found myself praying to be something I was not. I was thinking ahead to church the next morning, and how I'd feel like a fake when I showed up to sing pious hymns to a God who I feared would never answer my prayers. But *that* night, painful isolation opened to a new possibility. It was as though I heard God saying to me: "If I haven't taken this gay thing away after all your prayers, it's not because I'm not able to, but because I don't want to. What if this is a gift, rather than a curse? What if you are supposed to learn to live with this, rather than flee from it?" In my youth group, I'd learned that God was sending messages all the time, and my job was to pay attention so as not to miss them. So I took it as a clear sign when I opened my clothes drawer and lifted out to wear the item which happened to be on top. It was one of the many evangelical Christian t-shirts I had in my collection then. Under a great yellow cartoon smiley-face were the words of a psalm: "He has made me glad." That morning getting dressed for church, I read it in a different way: "He has made me gay." God *had* answered my prayer, but not in a way I could have imagined or accepted at first. Fear at the ways I didn't fit—and dread of a friendless future—would pass. I could be myself, and God would make me glad.

Have you ever had a moment like that, when you turned around a corner inside from dread to possibility? Can you recall times of such transformation, when life seems to divide into "before" and "after"? Was it a diagnosis, a birth or death, news of a job, a meeting of the eyes, or a paradigm-shifting conversation? Such moments are daunting because they call for us to change, yet they are also exhilarating because they unlock new paths for the future. They are glimpses of divine possibility which give us cause for new hope. This is our faith that God's tomorrow may transform our today. It is the hope with which we start every Advent season, anticipating the coming birth of Christ. As Marcia McFee writes, "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."¹

Zechariah knows what fear and dread of the future are like. In his day, Israel had been reduced from worldly success to a conquered people. Roman rulers called the shots, and Hebrew worship continued only because Rome allowed it. That's how it had been Zechariah's whole life. Every revolution for freedom had failed, and the temple priesthood was complicit in propping up Caesar's power. Even when Zechariah was chosen to perform the ultimate duty, to enter the holiest of holy rooms in the middle of the temple, he did so with little expectation that anything would change. Rather, he entered with dread that things would always *be* the way they had always *been*.

No wonder he was dumbfounded by the angel's appearance! Even this man of God could not believe the future foretold here. An old man just going through the motions, Zechariah receives Gabriel's announcement that he's a part of something much greater—God is doing something new. Zechariah and Elizabeth will bear a son in their old age. Their child is the one we call John the Baptist, a messenger for the coming Christ who will be a savior for the people. Elizabeth and Zechariah learn that God does not just go through the motions. Rather, when divine angels arrive they come with unexpected power, and a transforming call to become carriers of hope in God's name.

But it's hard to believe, isn't it? No wonder Zechariah lost his voice at first. This faith we follow is so often unspeakable when hope-less-ness and cynicism are widespread in the land. Then especially, we struggle to believe for ourselves, or at least to *voice* what gives us faith, hope, meaning and purpose. Zechariah's protest that he is old and beyond the age of raising children is just another form of what we start to believe ourselves. "I'm not good enough." "God couldn't really be interested in my life." "What can one person do?" Fear that the future will be like the past leads to hope's opposite: despair. We become complicit in silencing ourselves, in foreclosing possibilities by telling ourselves how great are the

¹ Marcia McFee, "Angels Among Us" worship series ([Worship Design Studio](#); 2017).

troubles, and how overwhelmed we already are. That is precisely the moment we need to hear the message of the angels: #DoNotBeAfraid.

I suspect for most of us, the angels do not show up in ethereal, feathery form. In my case at least, tidings of #morehope came from physical and familial messengers. God may have been telling me that gay was okay all along, but even though my heart was changed in prayer, I couldn't really believe it until angels in human form showed it to me. Until my mother said, "Are you sure you're gay? Okay, maybe we should go shopping sometime!" Until my grandmother said, "Of course you can be gay and a pastor; there's nothing wrong with that." Until my mentors in faith helped me find welcoming congregations. Until the United Church of Christ said "No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here." Until I've been transformed into a messenger too, with the promise that God offers us #morehope *this* Advent season, and we need never be afraid.

As we begin this Advent season of anticipation, whether we are daunted by all that is afoot in the world or still high on the best of Thanksgiving—family, turkey and cranberry wine—we are called to receive and share the same message of the angel to Zechariah, #morehope. Advent starts with this extraordinary story of God at work in the midst of very ordinary people. One person can and does make a difference, no matter how insignificant our contributions seem. So consider one another as we close, and consider this world in which we find ourselves now. Consider how we might share more hope in the next hour, next day, next week, and all this next season. There are angels among us, with a divine calling. God is making us ready to be messengers of hope through our words and actions, flying in the face of fear in an ever-changing world. Amen.