

Philippians 4:4-9

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵ Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸ Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹ Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Luke 1:5-25

⁵ 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. ⁶ Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. ⁷ But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

⁸ Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, ⁹ he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. ¹⁰ Now at the time of the incense-offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. ¹¹ Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ 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.' ¹⁸ 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.' ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ 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.'

21 Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. ²²When 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. ²³When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

24 After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, ²⁵“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.’

Sermon

This story, a sort of “nativity before the nativity” story, is just absolutely delightful and chock full of interesting tidbits and details. There’s enough here to preach on for the fullness of Advent, for sure, as I’ve done in years past. Like, for instance, the detail I picked up this year. Maybe it’s because I’m deep in the weeds of raising three incredibly energetic, and sometimes difficult, little boys, but the promise of the angel to Zechariah that his son “even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit.” Made me burst out laughing right in the middle of Tabor Bread as I wrote. All I could think was: oh, poor Elizabeth and Zechariah. They have no idea what they’re in for, in their “old age” no less, with a baby boy full of the Holy Spirit. I have absolutely no doubt little, hairy John the Baptist was more than a handful for his parents.

But what we’re talking about during Advent isn’t difficult children, it’s fear. For the next few weeks we’ll be looking at all the characters in the Nativity story who hear those words—“be not afraid.” In each case it’s from an angel, which is a pretty specific case. But angel aside, fear is a pretty universal condition, and worthy of our reflection for a few weeks. Fear often strikes at us in the unexpected: a sudden snow storm while driving, or the call from school that your kid didn’t arrive on the bus as planned. Or in the divorce proceedings or when your office is going through the dreaded “reorganization” or for some of you, literally in a war zone where your life is in danger. Today we’ll be looking at how we think when we’re afraid, and maybe learning a little about having compassion for others, and even harder, for ourselves, when we’re afraid.

First up to bat, Zechariah. He goes into the holy place to light the incense, all by himself, and who should be there but an angel. And he’s terrified. Obviously. I’d be terrified if I saw a person standing around in a place where I expected to be alone. Try it sometime, jump out at me from the quiet chapel and see how loud I shout. Actually, please don’t. I can’t be held responsible for my response, and it may not be very pastoral.

Anyway, Zechariah, he’s in this holy place, sees an angel, and he’s terrified, but then the angel says: do not be afraid. Your wife is going to have a baby, and that baby is going to be your pride and joy, and also a total handful to raise, and he’s going to blaze a trail that will change the world. And what does Zechariah say when his voice finally finds him again? He asks a question of doubt—how can this be? My wife and I, we’re so old? And the angel, ruffling his wings with indignation curses Zechariah to be mute for the rest of his wife’s

pregnancy, you know, because his doubt is so unreasonable. How dare he doubt Gabriel, the great messenger who stands in the presence of the Lord. And that is exactly what happens. Mute, for a while 9 months.

I go round and round with Zechariah and this story. I often put myself in his place and wonder what I would have done. Would I have questioned the angel, because logically I would have known after years and years of barrenness the supreme unlikeliness of bearing a child? Or would I have been smart enough to keep my mouth shut in the presence of the divine messenger? Or maybe, best of all, I would have had some excellent response, like “blessed be the Lord” or “thanks be to God” or whatever. You know, something appropriately holy and grateful. Some years I get him, and feel a little bad for his mute punishment. Other years I have a little less grace, because I assume I could have done better.

And then this year, NPR came to my rescue.

Shankar Vedantam is a reporter for NPR who also makes the podcast “Hidden Brain,” which is a sort of psychology and science breakdown. Usually we’ll hear a short snippet from Shankar on either the morning or evening news, and if it perks your interest, you can go and hear a more in depth conversation on Hidden Brain. Well, that’s just what happened this week. Hidden Brain is all about what psychologists call the “hot cold empathy gap” this week.¹ And I found that it was a fantastic tool for reading these advent stories about fear. So, buckle up with me for a just a minute of psych 101. We’ll get back to Zechariah, I promise.

So, imagine sticking your hand in an ice bath. It’s super cold, right? Could you do it for a full minute? Maybe, but for a lot of us, probably not. 20, maybe 30 seconds if you have a solid pain tolerance. Because cold water actually causes a lot more pain than you think. This is a common psychological experiment, as it’s a relatively safe way to induce a state of pain. So these researchers were doing it, and one of them tried, and he did about 20 seconds before pulling his hand out. Then, here’s what’s odd, just a few minutes later, like 3 minutes, he said outloud “that’s crazy! I can do a full minute!” and he plunged his hand back into the ice water, only to draw it out at 20 seconds, the pain was too much.

Now, from the outside, this seems nuts, right? He had literally just done this experiment, put his own hand in ice, and saw the result of 20 seconds. And then minutes later he didn’t believe it, and did the whole thing again. Why didn’t he trust the evidence of his own memory? Likely because of the hot-cold empathy gap. We have an impossible time remembering how it felt to be in one state when we’re in the other. When we’re not in pain, it’s nearly impossible to remember how bad the pain was, and so we stick our hand back in the ice a second time.

¹ <https://www.npr.org/2019/11/27/783495595/in-the-heat-of-the-moment-how-intense-emotions-transform-us>

We as humans have what psychologists call hot and cold states. When we're relatively relaxed, safe, happy, and even keep we're in a "cold" state. We can make logical, seemingly straightforward decisions. But when we're angry, in pain, fearful, anxious, in the throes of addiction, or otherwise aroused—whether it's for positive or negative emotional reasons—we're in a hot state. And weirdly, it's nearly impossible for us to predict what kinds of decisions we'll make in a hot state when we're in a cold state.

It turns out this holds for a lot of us, that we're terrible at predicting how we'll actually think and act when faced with big, hot emotional circumstances. Which makes us terrible at empathy towards others and even limits our empathy toward ourselves in states of fear or pain or high emotion. You all know this, when you've made a bad choice in the heat of some moment. Have you been able to forgive yourself for that bad choice? That illogical or hurtful choice?

When I was in a meeting with a man who actively harassed me and made multiple totally inappropriate comments, I remember getting a sort of buzzing in my ears, and I kind of knew that something wrong was happening, but I didn't walk out, I didn't tell him to stop, I honestly even questioned my own recollection of the meeting. Maybe he didn't mean to say those things, or didn't intend for them to be heard the way I heard them. Cold state Kelly can't understand why hot state Kelly didn't take more aggressive action. In this case, I was lucky there were some other folks in the room who heard, later assured me that I was not crazy, that what happened was wrong, and helped me follow up later. I couldn't have done that without their help. I couldn't bridge that hot-cold empathy gap with myself. I was furious at myself for not reacting better in the moment, and that self-compassion thing was nearly impossible.

And this brings me back to Zechariah, and eventually Mary and Joseph in the coming weeks—I can wonder what I would do, if I'd react with fear or serenity to an appearance of the holy messenger of God—but psychology pretty reliably tells me I don't actually know how I'd react unless it happened to me, too. And it's not as easy as we think to just "be not afraid." Because our bodies will react how they will react, and we might be powerfully afraid, despite every good intention.

So what then should we do? Is there nothing to be done, to deal with fear whenever it pops up in our lives? Are we simply fated to be afraid, and that's that? Of course not. But when we are afraid, and when others are afraid, we can react better to them than we otherwise might.

What we need is a little knowledge and a little compassion. A little knowledge can go a long way. One of the gifts of psychology as a discipline is that it really does unpack how we think and why we do what we do. If senators and reporters had known about this hot-cold empathy gap, and about the negative outcomes for women who report harassment, they might not have asked Anita Hill why she followed Clarence Thomas to a new job, after he harassed her at the first, implying that her harassment charges were baseless. Knowledge of how humans act in fearful states could have lent some credibility to her testimony.

And more than just credibility, it could have created compassion. And this is the big take away I want you to hear in this first “be not afraid” of Advent. The right response to Gabriel saying “be not afraid” isn’t, “well, ok then, I’m not afraid!” because that’s an impossible and ridiculous response. When we are afraid, we are afraid. The right response is, in a sense, retrospective, and it is compassion. To exercise toward ourselves and others a deep compassion and an understanding that who we are and how we act in hot moments of fear and anxiety is not our best or most rational self. To be compassionate to Zechariah’s questioning. And in the coming weeks, to hear Joseph’s rush to divorce and abandonment with an understanding ear, or Mary’s logical concern that the entire pregnancy is impossible with tenderness.

And more than the characters in the Bible, to exercise this knowledge and compassion toward one another. To know that in the hot state of fear brought about by losing a job, going through a divorce, navigating addiction, or even just a bad drive through a snow storm, that not one of us is our best self, but that does not mean we are any less deserving of compassion—from others, but even moreso from ourselves.