

A Spiritual Time Out

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

December 9, 2018

Scripture: Jeremiah 33: 14-16

by Rev. Dave Le Grand

I wonder if you have noticed in your life something that I have in mine. Have you ever noticed that you are not at your best when fear has taken hold of you? I'll admit that that is not a novel concept. But I'm thinking about those nights when you happen to be alone and you hear things go bump. Or there is one of those emergency alerts we now hear at times. Imagine a situation where an inmate has escaped in Sudbury and you are asked to remain in your home, but to stay calm. Fear is the context of our 2nd week of Advent Gospel reading today from the storyteller Luke.

Zechariah is a Temple priest, he is an elite. They have not had the blessing of children, and his wife, Elizabeth, is past child-bearing age. It is about as bad as it can get by the standards of ancient times. A perfect moment for God to demonstrate that where there is a holy will, there is a holy way.

As happens a number of times in the Gospels, notably with shepherds in the Christmas story, we get a taste of what I think is a bit of Bible humour; God's messenger, the angel Gabriel tells Zechariah, "Do not be afraid!" Of course, who is **not** going to be afraid in such a moment – encountering a divine being?!

Luke describes Zechariah as terrified. That baseline of terror probably doesn't make Zechariah very receptive to the news Gabriel is bringing - that Elizabeth will soon have a baby! Zechariah just cannot believe it, and who is to blame him?

Fear and doubt prevail in that moment for poor Zechariah and so the consequence is that he must spend the entirety of Elizabeth's pregnancy unable to speak. THAT must have been excruciating, if ancient Jewish priests are anything like Christian clergy – not talking is a challenge!

Can you ever recall a time when you were gripped by some fear? Any chance that you, like Zechariah, were not at your best? Not terribly receptive to change? Not open to much at all. Let us allow Zechariah's experience to invite us to consider the destructive power of unfettered fear. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States a culture of fear and vengeance gripped American culture. Everyone was looking for a terrorist in their neighbourhood. Generalizations and profiling of people of colour ... People with accents ... Muslims were targeted with hatred. An unlimited budget was dedicated to appeasing fear. The military tested out new weapons in Iraq. Polarization of viewpoints split communities. Remember the phrase of a past American president: "If you're not with us, then you're against us"?

Fear & polarization of the population might not be as obvious here in Canada... We may not build physical walls. But in Canada we certainly DO have polarization & prejudice that is grounded in fear of things we don't understand. That sort of fear sucks the capacity to be compassionate out of us and certainly impedes our ability as Christians to follow the ways of unconditional love of Jesus.

Yes, we Christians DO fall prey to fear. In previous churches I've served, wonderful communities of faith, just the mere discussion about people of the LGBTQ community could inspire fear. People who dedicated their lives to serving their church & God suddenly were resorting to "us" and "them" language. I tried an experiment at my previous congregation, set up a makeshift test group comprised of people who had profound differences of opinion. It was a small group and we followed some very strict rules about how we would talk, how we would listen. When everyone was able to speak, very personally, and not making observations directly about another person, people shared their stories in a heartfelt way, and they listened. The point of this was communication, growing together. These were fearful times for me, though I tried not to show it. I prayed a lot for the Spirit to work its magic where I lacked. Trinity United in Capreol have acknowledged that they are still talking about holy hospitality, and that is good.

A culture of fear can control us. A spiritual "time out" can do wonders.

We have to imagine what Zechariah did with his quiet time. He surely did a lot of listening, perhaps hearing things for the first time. Any of you who have enjoyed retreats, especially silent ones know how powerful that experience of quiet is. It can be very difficult at first, not to talk, to spend alone time with yourself. But for me, silent retreat became rather liberating. I imagine Zechariah, once the fear slowly dissipated in him, he probably entered a creative and spiritual groove, because when he finally uttered words, the name of his baby, he with the poem called the Benedictus – a soaring proclamation Of God's glory.

That song is quite the opposite of fearful. That was a spiritual time out well spent! Scholar Roger J. Gench tells the story about philosopher Geoff Midgley. Midgley tended to have a gloomy outlook in life. In the early 1980s (remember, this was a time of heightened Cold War fears) Midgley one day had tea with his landlady. They talked about the dismal stories in the newspaper – stories about the potential of nuclear holocaust. Suddenly he blurted out, "The world is horrible! If we had a button we could press that would finally blow the whole thing up, which of us would be able to help pressing it?"

"Oh I wouldn't," she said. "I'm terrified of electric things." Humour can help to put fear in perspective.¹

This week I invite you to look at where fear and fundamentalism (and other "isms" that are fed by fear) are real forces in your life, in your relationships, in your beliefs, threatening to push your focus inward. As you face fear, remember the story in the Gospel of John: it was after Jesus had been crucified, and the disciples were cowering in a locked room, afraid. Jesus appeared to them, his opening words were, "Peace be with you". [John 20]

Peace ... elsewhere in John's Gospel Jesus talked about Peace. Not the type of peace the Roman Empire espoused, or the kind of peace that is the absence of war or violence.

¹ Roger J. Gench. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.*

Jesus sensed the fear of his disciples so he said:

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.
I do not give to you as the world gives.” [John 14: 27]

A peace not of this world, but a holy peace is life-changing.

It is not an easy peace to grasp, to accept, Zechariah didn't.

But sitting with it, in spiritual *time out*, he and all of us will get it.