

Sermon – 1 Advent, Year A
November 30, 2025
Triune Mercy Center
Rev. Trevor Scott Barton

Sing the prayer -

O God who made the heart and ears,
we listen carefully as you draw near,
to hear your word in many ways,
and live your word throughout our days.

Luke 1:5-18

“In the time of Herod, we long for God to break in.”

Good morning.

We are beginning a new sermon series today, on this first Sunday of Advent, titled What Do You Fear? Insisting On Hope This Advent, from Sanctified Art.

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 be afraid.” 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?

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, or 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.

These sermons will take the words, “Do not be afraid,” that are heard from the Angel Gabriel in our text today, and that are found 70 times in the NIV translation of the Bible from which I’m reading today, and turn them into an interrogative sentence instead of an imperative sentence, into a question instead of a command.

I would love to be able to stand up in this pulpit and speak out, “Do not be afraid!” and make all of your fears melt away.

If I thought I could do that, however, I’d be like the lesson learned in a reel I saw recently in which a woman looks into the camera and says, “I’ve been suffering from anxiety all of my life. My spouse just said, “Just don’t worry about it,” and now my anxiety is gone.”

“Do not be afraid?”

I wish I could be your Gabriel.

I wish.

So instead I want to ask you, I want to ask myself, “What do you fear?” and then explore the ways we can face those fears TOGETHER, as a part of the BELOVED COMMUNITY, as a part of the UPSIDE DOWN KINGDOM, knowing that GOD IS WITH US and WE HAVE EACH OTHER.

Martin Luther King, Jr., in a sermon he preached titled “The Mastery of Fear,” said “Everywhere we turn we see that monster fear; every road we travel we meet that monster fear—fear of others, fear of the future, fear of change, fear of old age, fear of disease—and at last many come to that chronic state of what the psychiatrists call phobophobia, the fear of fear, being afraid of being afraid.¹⁶ And so our homes, institutions, prisons, churches are filled with people who are hounded by day and harrowed by night because of some fear that lurks ready to spring into action as soon as one is alone, or as soon as the lights go out.”

That is just as true today as when he preached it in the 1960’s, isn’t it?

I. CHARLOTTE, N.C. (WLOS) — Fourteen-year-old Ace Salvador said he knew something was wrong the moment he looked out his window Tuesday afternoon.

“I was scared for everybody,” he said. “My family, my neighbors, everyone.”

Residents at the Country Club Apartments in east Charlotte said they saw ICE and Border Patrol agents moving through the complex on Tuesday, Nov. 18, questioning residents and taking people into custody.

Throughout the afternoon, the fear could be seen on sidewalks and stairwells.

Children wearing school backpacks jumped out of cars and sprinted straight to their doors. Mothers stood crying at the bottom of staircases, calling their kids inside. Neighbors watched from windows as dark SUVs passed through the parking lot.

"It felt like everyone was holding their breath," Salvador said. "Like we were all just waiting for something bad to happen."

Salvador said his parents asked him to speak publicly because they believed their community needed to be heard.

"My family said, 'Tell people what's happening,'" he said. "If we don't say anything, nothing will change."

He said his biggest fear is families being separated.

"I don't want to see kids without their parents," Salvador said. "That's what scares me the most."

People were afraid.

God broke in through the courage of an immigrant teenager.

II. One morning, I sat down beside two of my friends at one of the tables in the dining hall in the Mercy Center next door to this sanctuary.

They'd spent the night on the street, with no roof over their heads but the sky.

Their eyes were tired, their faces weary and worn.

"It's tough being out there all night," they told me.

"You try to find a peaceful, quiet place to rest and catch a few hours of sleep.

When you finally find that place, you sit down.

it's so hard to relax.

You look to see who's around you?

is there anyone who might try to hurt you?

You hold on to your belongings, the only things you own in the world.

is there anyone who might try to steal them?

You finally relax enough to feel sleepy.

You close your eyes.

Your ears are still listening carefully to everything going on around you.

You fall into a light and dreamless sleep.

Then someone puts a boot on your leg and shakes you.

"You can't sleep here," they say.

"Move on."

"Where can I go?" you ask.

"I don't know," they say. "But you can't stay here."

So we get up, gather our things, and move on.

We find a new place.

And the same thing happens again.

I'm afraid people aren't going to see me for who I am, a person who needs a peaceful and quiet place to rest and get a good nights sleep.

I'm afraid people aren't going to see me as a person, but as a thing that doesn't matter, like a piece of trash blowing up against the side of a building in a fall wind.

I'm afraid people aren't going to see me.

i'm afraid people don't care.

My friends were afraid.

God broke in through people living on the street willing to open their hearts and share their story.

III. When I was a little boy, I would carry my blanket with me wherever I would go.

It was as if Linus had made his way out of the Peanuts comic strip in the Greenville News and into my little house at 2701 East Lee Road in Taylors, S.C.

I named my blanket Boo Boo because it was there to soothe me when I fell down onto the concrete of my driveway and scraped my knee or scratched my arm on a branch near the top of the tall maple tree in our front yard.

It was there to strengthen me if someone said something unkind and I needed the courage to say, "Stop."

It was there to save me when I woke up in the middle of the night after a bad dream.

In every way it was my security blanket.

I could transform bad into good just by having my Boo Boo beside me.

Now that I'm a grownup, I don't carry my blanket with me anymore.

I still have it, though.

It is tattered and torn, weathered and worn, but I can see it with my eyes, feel it with my hands and smell it with my nose, so it remains real to me and has yet to move to the more imaginary parts of the farthest reaches of my memory.

As I look at my blanket, I see the tear from the time I couldn't find my mom inside of the house.

I ran outside the front door toward my elderly neighbor's house crying at the top of my little lungs, "I can't find my momma! I can't find my momma!"

I felt the gentle, wrinkled, bony touch of Mrs. Tooke's hand on my shoulder as she guided me around her plum tree to my fence and whispered, "There she is right there. She's hanging out the laundry on the clothesline."

I threw my blanket over the fence as if to use it as a rope to climb to my mom.

I caught it on the barbs along the rim of the steel poles and ripped it right through the middle of its soft, cotton face.

Mom stitched it up as if she were a doctor stitching up a wayward wound on a broken child.

I run my fingers along those stitches, and feel the scar on my Boo Boo.

That reminds me of the time it helped me find my lost mom.

That reminds me of a time I was afraid, and God broke in through my Mom, my elderly neighbor, and my Boo Boo.

What are some tangible things we can do when we're afraid?

My friend Ann and I were talking about old hymns we remember from our childhood, about how they come to us to help us find faith, love and hope when we're afraid. "What a friend we have in Jesus" is one that comes to me over and over again. God breaks in through that hymn.

Passages of Scripture come to me to help me find faith, love and hope when I'm afraid. "The Lord is my shepherd" is one that comes to me over and over again. God breaks in through that passage.

Resisting (by protesting, writing, and speaking) all that dehumanizes, demonizes and destroys others helps me find faith, love and hope when I'm afraid. Using my hands, feet and voice over and over again helps me help God use me to break into the world into small and simple ways.

What do you fear?

What if someone gave you a truth serum before you answered that question?

What we can be sure of is that God is listening to each and every prayer, feeling our deepest aches, and drawing near to us when we tremble.

When you are afraid, when I am afraid, I hope for Triune Mercy to be a place and people where we can name our fears and, with Compassion, Commitment and Creativity, walk through those fears with each other and with God as a part of the Beloved Community, as a part of the Upside Down Kingdom of God.

Amen.

Benediction

Even though our text ends today with Zechariah making excuses, the good news is he worked his way through his fear before it settled deep inside of him and spoke these beautiful lines that I want to send you out with today.

Through the heartfelt mercies of our God,
God's Sunrise will break in upon us,
Shining on those in the darkness,
those sitting in the shadow of fear,
Then showing us the way, one foot at a time,
down the path of peace.

- Zechariah, Luke 1