

I was watching "Good Morning America" one day this week and George Stephanopoulos led into a story by saying something to the effect that , "Americans are approaching the thanksgiving holidays with fear." After watching the intro I said to myself, "I'm not." And I would hope that my faith in God has something to do with that. That fear is something that I am choosing not to embrace.

We are being told right now that there are lots of things and people we are to fear. It depends on your perspective but we are being told over and over again that we are supposed to be a fearful people. We are told that we are to fear people that are different from whatever we feel that we are.

We Americans are told that we are to fear people fleeing war in other countries. We are told to fear people that look different from us. People of color in the inner city are being told that they are to fear police officers.

And the more fearful we become there are some people who are looking to profit off of our fear. There is a reason why we see so many advertisements and sponsorships by Security companies. The more fearful we become the more security systems and weapons we buy.

But it is in the midst of all of this fear that we are being told that we are to feel, we are invited into the story of the birth of Jesus Christ. What I hope we are able to grasp are the words that the angels say to Zechariah and the Virgin Mary that they are to, "Fear Not." My hope through these next several weeks is that we can claim for ourselves the words of the messenger of God who says to us, "Fear Not." And if it comes down to believing news media, advertisers, or messengers of God, I am going with the messengers of God.

What I hope is that in the midst of all of the voices that are shouting at us about what to fear that we can claim ownership of the words from the angels of the Lord who tell Zechariah and Mary, “Fear Not.” To accept the words of the angel and “Fear Not” is a rejection of our cultural norm right now.

Today is the first Sunday in the season of Advent. Advent means “coming” and this is the season when we prepare ourselves for the birth of the Christ child. We change the paraments to purple to represent the preparation to welcome a king. We light candles on the Advent wreath to remind ourselves of what this birth of a new king means for the world. The birth of a king who is unlike any earthly king that has ever been born.

We decorate the sanctuary inside and out and put lights in the windows. And what I plan to emphasize each Sunday of Advent is the same theme which is very contrary to the message in our culture right now. And that theme is the message which the angels give to Zechariah and Mary to “Fear Not.”

The first passage that we read is a passage written to a fearful community. Jerusalem has been completely destroyed by the invasion of the Babylonians in 587 BC. The inhabitants of Israel are living as conquered people under Babylonian captivity. Their sense of security has been violated. They have no idea what tomorrow will bring and if they can survive.

And they begin to ask theological questions such as “where is God in the midst of all of this destruction? Will God allow them to return home again? Is God with them anymore?” They are a people living in fear. But in the midst of this fear the prophet Jeremiah gives them a very different interpretation of their world.

In the face of terrible devastation, with evidence to the contrary, Jeremiah insists that God is still in control and that God still keeps promises. But to see those promises fulfilled they will have to wait.

Advent is the season of waiting. We are waiting to celebrate the birth of the Christ child. But as author Henri Nouwen shares, “fearful people have a hard time waiting. We have a hard time waiting because when we are afraid we want to get away from where we are. But if we cannot flee then we fight instead.”

Nouwen continues by saying that, “many of our destructive acts come from the fear that something harmful will be done to us first. People who live in a world of fear are more likely to make aggressive, hostile, destructive responses than people who are not so frightened. The more afraid we are the more difficult it is to wait.”

And I think Nouwen is right. The more fearful we are the more we want to inflict violence upon others. The more fearful we become the less generous and hospitable we become. Presbyterian pastor and author Eugene Petterson says, “All the water in the oceans cannot sink a ship unless the water gets inside. Nor can all the trouble in the world harm us unless it gets inside of us.”

When we live in fear and react out of fear then we have allowed the trouble in the world to get inside of us. But we are called, I believe, to resist the temptation of allowing fear to be inside of us. Fear makes us act in ways that are not faithful to the gospel and leads us away from God. Fear makes us shun our neighbor in need rather than reach out to them in Christian love and imagination.

Read short story entitled “Guest” from *A Stubborn Sweetness and Other Stories for the Christmas Season*. (p.83-91)

So which voices are you listening to? The ones that say, “Fear!” or the messengers of God that say, “Fear Not.”

-Patterson, Katherine, *A Stubborn Sweetness and Other Stories for the Christmas Season,* WJKP, Louisville

-*Watch for the Light: Reading for Advent and Christmas,* Orbis, NY

-Petterson quote from sermon by Amy Butler, "Love Will Conquer Hate,"
baptistnews.com