

Fear Factor

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Luke 1:57-66

Sermons Series:
In Christ Together
for the World

*Why do the
wicked
prosper and
the righteous
suffer?*

Why do the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer?

It's a question that Jeremiah and Job asked. David did, also. You can add me to the list. It's a question I've asked numerous times in my life and ministry. The apparent inequities of life confound me. Why do bad things happen to seemingly good people? Why do the good die young?

Luke wrestles with such questions as he opens his gospel. He begins by introducing us to Zechariah and Elizabeth. They are righteous people; blameless, really (1:6). It's the only time Luke uses such a word to describe people. You can't get any better than blameless.

We read in verse 7, "But they had no children and were getting along in years." In Luke's day, having children was a make-or-break issue for couples. Perpetuating the family name meant everything to a family. When the great patriarch Abraham and his wife, Sarah, are unable to conceive, Abraham goes to heroic measures to produce offspring. He marries Sarah's maidservant to keep his lineage going. That explains why Elizabeth

rejoices, later in the story, that God "has taken away her disgrace," as she calls it (1:25). Some, in her day, went so far as to suggest that infertility was a sign of God's disfavor. Surely the infertility of this blameless couple ought to silence their critics.

Zechariah serves as a priest in the Jewish temple. There are 24 divisions of priests who serve the temple at two-week intervals through the year. When the responsibility falls to Zechariah's division, they are chosen, by means of a lottery, for the high honor of burning incense. Since there are 18,000 priests, no priest was eligible to perform this sacred ritual more than once. Some priests, therefore, were never chosen for the honor. So, it's a really big deal when Zechariah's number is chosen. It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Zechariah enters the inner temple to offer incense while people congregate outside. As he goes about his sacred duty, Gabriel, one of only two angels identified by name in Scripture, suddenly appears. It freaks Zechariah out. Luke records he is terrified (1:12). You may remember the TV show, "Touched by an Angel."

Even devout people struggle to believe God's promises.

Zechariah is “terrified by an angel.”

“Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard,” Gabriel says (1:12). Elizabeth will bear a son whom you are to name John (meaning God is gracious). This son will serve as a forerunner to the long-awaited Messiah.

Zechariah asks, “How will I know that this is so?” (1:18). I’m an old man and my wife is no spring chicken, either. Zechariah wants a sign, some proof.

You want a sign, Zechariah. Here’s your sign; you will be rendered speechless until further notice (1:20).

The people outside are beginning to wonder what’s taking him so long. When Zechariah reappears, it looks like he has seen a ghost. When it comes time to pronounce the priestly blessing, Zechariah can’t utter a sound.

This is the last we hear of Zechariah until Elizabeth is ready to deliver her baby. She gives birth to a baby boy, which becomes the buzz all over town. People at their advanced age don’t give birth very often. When it comes time to name him, everybody assumes Zechariah is the odds-on favorite. Since Zechariah can’t speak, he writes, “His name is John” (1:63). Immediately, Zechariah’s tongue is loosed as he breaks forth in praise, “Blessed be the name of the Lord” (1:67).

So what, right? So what difference does this sermon make to my life? Faith seems to come easy for some of us and harder for others. Maybe you struggle to believe. Your faith life seems unsteady and uneven.

Take heart, my friends. Even devout people struggle to believe God’s promises. Zechariah and Elizabeth are considered blameless. Blameless, I tell you! Yet, when Gabriel brings the promise of God’s blessing, Zechariah wants another sign. The incongruity of it all! Zechariah has the audacity to stand before a messenger from heaven and ask for another sign. Exactly what kind of sign do you want, Zechariah? Does a visit from an angel announcing a revelation from God not qualify as a sign?

People ask, “Can I have doubts and still be a Christian?” When a disciple named Thomas is confronted with the news of Jesus’ resurrection, he responds, “Unless I see the marks in his hand and side, I will not believe” (John 20:25). A short while later, Jesus appears in the house where Thomas and the disciples have gathered. Jesus walks right up to Thomas. Jesus doesn’t say, Thomas, what’s your problem. Why didn’t you believe? Rather, he invites Thomas to touch his hands and side.

Martin Marty, a Lutheran theology professor, began the

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practice of reading the Psalms with his wife during her long ordeal with terminal cancer. She had to wake up at midnight to take her medication to combat the nausea caused by chemotherapy. It took awhile for both of them to go back to sleep, so Martin began to read the psalms aloud to her. One night, she caught him skipping Psalms 88-90. Martin had skipped over the words in these stark psalms, such as Psalm 88: “My life draws near the grave. I am counted among those who go down to the pit.” Instead, he moved ahead to a more consoling image, “He will cover you with his feathers and under his wings you will find refuge” (Psalm 91).

“Why did you skip those psalms?” his wife demanded. Martin told her he wasn’t sure she could take Psalm 88 that night. “Go back and read it,” she said. “If we don’t deal with the darkness, the others won’t shine out.”

Martin Marty wrote a book about this dark time entitled *A Cry of Absence*. He remarked that half of the psalms are wintry in tone and only a third of them express a summery disposition. The Psalms give voice to the full range of emotions that we experience in life.

Some people regard doubt as the antithesis of faith. Doubt doesn’t have to be the enemy of faith. Honest doubt keeps faith dynamic. Emily Dickinson wrote, “We both believe and disbelieve a hundred times an

hour, which keeps faith nimble.” Or to say it another way, Frederick Buechner writes, “Doubts are ants in the pants that keep faith moving.”

Perhaps fear is faith’s antonym. Fear is what keeps us from believing God’s promises. Consider the “fear factor” in Luke’s telling of the Christmas story. When, in our story, Gabriel comes to a frightened Zechariah, he is told, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah” (1:13). When Gabriel appears to Mary, whose first instinct is fear, he reassures her with the words, “Do not be afraid, Mary” (1:30). When Jesus’ birth is heralded by angels to terrified shepherds, what do the angels tell them? You guessed it, “Do not be afraid” (2:10).

“Do not be afraid” is what Jesus says to Peter when he walks on the water (5:10). “Do not be afraid” is what Jesus says to Jairus when his daughter has died (8:50). “Do not be afraid, little flock” is what Jesus says to his dispirited disciples (12:32).

Fear can be a normal, God-given emotion. God created us with the capacity for fear. Yet, some fears are irrational and disproportionate to the danger at hand. Let’s suppose I am walking in the woods and hear a rustling sound. Assuming it to be a small, furry creature, I pull back the branch, only to find a huge grizzly bear staring me in the face. I would be experiencing normal, logical fear. But suppose I visit a zoo, see a

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grizzly bear and become terrified. That would be an example of abnormal, illogical fear.

When I look at something with the aid of binoculars, the object appears closer than it really is. It's the same way with exaggerated, illogical fears. They seem more menacing than they really are.

The Greek word for fear in the verse, "Do not be afraid" (phobos), is where we derive our English word, phobia. A phobia is an exaggerated, illogical fear of something. There are at least 530 clinical phobias according to the last count. Some of these fears are common, such as the fear of spiders (arachnophobia), snakes (ophidiophobia), flying (aerophobia), heights (acrophobia) or closed in spaces (claustrophobia). Some phobias are less common, such as homilophobia, which is the fear of sermons. That's right, evidently sermons can cause a shortness of breath, irregular heartbeat and an overall feeling of dread. Some people stay away from churches because of a fear of sermons. Don't try this at home, kids. Mom and dad, I can't go to church today. I have homilophobia.

We reference Jesus' Great Commission quite often in this church. When Jesus is about to ascend into heaven, he directs his disciples, "Go and make disciples of all people" (Matthew 28:16). From such

passages, we have distilled our disciple-making mission. We are learning all our lives what it means to be Jesus' disciples and urge others to do the same. Jesus' Great Commission also comes with his Great Invitation. "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age (Matthew 28:20). Faith overcomes fear.

Object permanence describes the concept that objects continue to exist even when they are no longer visible to us. Even when we can't see an object, we know it still exists.

If an infant can't see something, it doesn't exist. Infants haven't yet developed the capacity for object permanence. There is no reality for babies except what they can feel, see, smell, taste and touch. "Out of sight, out of mind" is how babies experience life. At about 8-9 months of age, children acquire object permanence. They acquire the cognitive ability to know something exists, even when it's not visible. Children are able to call up mental pictures of people or things even when they're not visible.

We need, in our Christian lives, to develop object permanence. We don't have to see something to know it exists. Even when God seems absent God is still present with us.

