

November 30th, 2025

Luke 1:5-13 “God Breaks In” Advent 2025 Week 1

This year we’re kicking off our Advent season with a series about the power of hope over fear. Some of you know I co-host a radio show called *Faith and Common Ground* with my colleague and friend Amber French St. Clare. Back in September, Amber and I went to a KZFR fundraiser called *A Touch of Chico*. It showcases local massage therapists, body workers, and artists. And since we like to do spontaneous interviews at community events, we grabbed our little hand-held recorder and headed over to the Chico Creek Nature Center to see what sort of trouble we could get into. We were trying to figure out what kind of series we wanted to kick off. We just finished one where we were interviewing people who were called into service and ministry, but we weren’t sure where we wanted to go next. So we decided to borrow an idea from church: We asked people one simple question—*What is your greatest joy, and what is your biggest concern?* It’s the kind of question where you expect a wide variety of answers, right? Two things surprised us right away.

First, hardly anyone turned us down. Usually when we’re out in public, like Thursday market or some other event, maybe 30% of the people decline. At this event? Only two of the twenty-odd people we interviewed declined. Second, almost everyone gave the *same* answer. Not verbatim, mind you, but the theme was the same. Every person said their greatest joy was family or friends, and their greatest concern was uncertainty about the future and fear of the unknown. You can find this show in podcast form on Spotify if you’re interested.

Okay, so let’s be honest: human beings don’t cope well with uncertainty, even though most of life is uncertain. When we can’t predict what’s coming, something inside of us—some strange “lizard brain” switch kicks us into high alert. We imagine worst-case scenarios. We brace for danger. And it shapes how we move through the world.

Let's take a look at the scripture Lori read this morning. Both Matthew and Luke's gospels begin Jesus' birth story with the same phrase: "*In the days of King Herod...*" For many Jewish families living under Roman occupation, these were days filled with exactly that kind of fear and uncertainty. Last week we talked a little about Rome, and I joked about how the Judeans didn't really appreciate the things Rome brought to the table to make life easier—roads, aqueducts, sanitation. I also mentioned that Augustus Caesar, the emperor at the time, wasn't considered a bad ruler. In fact, many historians rank him as Rome's best. He didn't want to be called *king*. He saw himself as a stabilizer, a restorer, someone who brought order to a chaotic world.

But here's the catch: Rome maintained that order by putting local strongmen in power—client kings, or "puppet kings"—who were expected to keep their people in line. For Judeans at this point in history, the problem wasn't Caesar. The problem was the puppet king Herod the Great. Herod was brilliant, ambitious, and utterly paranoid. He executed anyone he perceived as a threat—his wife, his mother-in-law, even three of his sons. Augustus reportedly said, "It is better to be Herod's pig than Herod's son." So when Luke writes, "In the days of King Herod," he's saying, "*In a time of instability, insecurity, and fear.*"

Into that world, Luke introduces us to a couple—Zechariah and Elizabeth, the future parents of John who would one day baptize his cousin Jesus in the Jordan River. Zechariah was a priest who had lived long enough to see Rome rise to power and to watch Herod wield that power with violence. And he and his wife Elizabeth carried another burden: they had longed for a child but were unable to conceive. In a culture where childlessness was seen as a divine judgment, it wasn't just grief—it was public shame. And yet Luke tells us they were righteous. Their faith endured, even in disappointment.

While Zechariah was in the temple offering incense, an angel appeared to him. And his response wasn't relief—it was fear. Deep, soul-shaking

fear. Not a quick jump scare. It was the kind of physical trembling that comes when something unexpected breaks into your world and everything in you recoils. Anyone who struggles with anxiety knows exactly what that feels like.

Fear can be more than a momentary reaction. It can settle into us. It can shrink our spirit and limit our courage. When fear becomes a way of being, it shapes how we see the world. It gets into our bodies, our relationships, our conversations, and our public life. For many people today—especially in war-torn places or situations where power feels unaccountable or out of control—fear becomes the background noise of daily life. And like Zechariah, sometimes we get so used to disappointment that when hope finally *does* arrive, it startles us. When God interrupts, we flinch.

So when the angel says, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard,” it isn’t a dismissal of his fear. It’s a reorientation. *Your fear is real, but it is not the whole story.* God has been listening. God steps into the silence, the ache, the longing—into the very place where fear takes root. And God’s response doesn’t begin with the miracle of a baby. It begins with recognition: *Your prayer has been heard.* God’s attention has never wavered.

This scripture is a word for all of us in this Advent season. In these weeks of waiting, we’re not told to pretend we’re not afraid. We’re invited to *name* our fear honestly and ask how it has shaped us. Fear isn’t the enemy. Being *ruled* by fear is. Fear tells us that something matters—that something in us is vulnerable and precious. It doesn’t need to be erased. It needs to be acknowledged and held in God’s presence. And because it’s Advent, of course I’m going to give you some questions to think about this week. You knew they were coming:

- **What are you (and we) afraid to hope for?**
- **What prayers have we quietly stopped praying?**
- **Where has fear caused us to shrink back?**

Zechariah's fear didn't disqualify him. It marked the beginning of his transformation. Even in his silence, he became part of God's unfolding story—a story that leads us to the birth of Jesus. And so “In the days of Herod,” and in *every* time of fear, grief, and longing, God breaks in. God broke into Zechariah's fear with presence. God breaks into *our* fear with *hope*. And this Advent, the invitation isn't to get rid of fear, but to trust that even in our fear and trembling, *God is near*.