

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
30 November 2025

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
First Sunday of Advent

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“In the Time of Herod, We Long for God to Break In”

First Sermon in the Advent, Christmas, & Epiphany series,
What do you fear? Insisting on Hope this Advent

NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.

Lamentations 3:55-57; Luke 1:5-13

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

We have arrived in Advent. Or, I should say, we are *arriving*. Advent is a Latin word that means “coming” or “arrival.” But Advent is not a singular event, it’s an unfolding season.

And Advent is to Christmas as Lent is to Easter. We don’t get to the Resurrection of Christ I the world without first going through the suffering and death of Jesus in the tomb. We don’t get the birth of Christ, the Light of the World, without first going through the waiting gestation of Jesus in the womb.

Which is to say, Advent is a pregnant season. Much as an expectant mother takes great care to ensure her own nutrition, diet, sleep, and health are as strong as possible as she is “with-child,” we use these weeks of Advent to ensure our body, mind, heart, and spirit are

as healthy as possible to receive and bear the in-breaking of God God-with-us, Emmanuel, into our lives.

I love how Sarah Bessey speaks to the mystery and muddiness of this season: “Advent is the Church’s way of observing [and proclaiming] the [odd] truth we believe that God came to be with us once, God is still with us [now], and God is coming again to set all things right [in ways we have yet to see or understand].” “And,” she adds, “if you [need] a daily calendar of chocolates to help you make it through this mystery, well, bless it and enjoy.”¹

I love this sentiment because as I think of the gifts of Advent—Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love—I like to think of **Joy** as the child-like delight of this season,

¹ Sarah Bessey, “A Simple Advent for the Exhausted Ones,” *Field Notes with Sarah Bessey* (20 Nov. 2025),

accessed on Nov. 30, 2025 at <https://sarahbessey.substack.com/>.

unwrapping little surprises; **Peace** as the blanketing snow cover that quiets all the controversies and conflicts and noise; **Love** as the crackling fireplace, the warmth and security of being at home with God; and **Hope** as the heartbeat of it all, silently there, working, beating, keeping everything about our faith alive—whether we realize it or not.

If hope is hard for you to hold on to, you are not alone. And maybe, the real gift of hope is that we don't have to hold onto it at all...it holds onto us. In fact, what if Hope lives in the crevices of our fears?! Think about that! And Lord knows, we *all* have fear. Fear of...will the medicine work? Will I get the job? Will this depression ever lift? Will my kid be safe at school? Will I have access to gender-affirming care (or affordable health care at all)? Will the bombs ever stop falling? Will our country be okay? Will her memory get worse? Will I die alone?

Our Advent-to-Christmas-to Epiphany theme this year comes from the creatives at *A Sanctified Art*. And the theme is not a statement of fact, but a question that invites us to

deeper curiosity, compassion, and courage: *What do you fear?*

It's not “do you fear?” or “do you have fear?” because they know fear is a primal and normal human emotion. But rather, *what do you fear?* Because if we can name our fears and speak them before God and one another, they have less power over us and actually can be the catalyst for powerful transformation *within* us.

And—we are in good company with our fear because it is clear from how the gospel writers tell the Christmas story, that fear is their internal and external landscape.

First, let's look at fear as related to the external landscape of the Christmas Story, which takes place, as Luke tells us, “*In the Time of Herod...*” (Luke 1:5)

This timing is Everything in terms of how we understand God coming to us in physical form as Jesus, Emmanuel (God-with-us). God *chose* to come to us in a very dangerous, difficult time—not as a “knight in shining armor” but as a naked, vulnerable baby born to ordinary parents without a lot of means. Jesus had to grow up and make it in this world, just as

we do. Nothing about his life was privileged as a Jew born in Palestine during Roman occupation (wrap your head around that!), “*In the Time of Herod...*”

Now you hear Herod’s name all the time in our holiday scriptures, but in case you need a refresher on who Herod was and how he ruled:

King Herod as also known as Herod the Great, and in the 1st century BCE, he was the ruler of Judea, which at that time, was a Roman province. Now as we know, “throughout history, it has been the kings and emperors with the most terrible conquests and brutal victories under their belt who have come to be known by the suffix ‘The Great,’”² so that gives you a hint as to his character already!

Herod was named King of Judea by the Roman Senate and at this time, Judea was not free, it was an occupied territory. Much like we may think of modern-day Israel occupying Gaza or the West Bank over the last many decades, with Palestinians not being able to move or live freely as they wish, in Judea, the Jews

at this time had their every move dictated by Rome. Because Herod’s his family was from Judea he may have been called an “allied king,” but he was very much a vassal to the Roman Empire and he was positioned to rule and work for glory of the Romans. For this reason, Herod had a lot of enemies, not least of whom were his own Jewish subjects.³

While Herod attempted to conform to Jewish law at times—he minted coins that did not feature human images, he employed priests for the construction of the Second Temple, and he put in ritual purification baths into his palaces—Herod was still much more invested in keeping his non-Jewish and Roman citizens happy and was believed to favor them over subjects who practiced the Jewish religion. For example, he built a golden eagle outside the Temple of Jerusalem to symbolize the Roman Legion.⁴

Even more, Herod was obsessed with his own ego, power, and image. He was a “despotic and tyrannical ruler who ruthlessly suppressed any murmurs against

² Rittika Dhar, “Ancient Civilizations, Roman Empire—King Herod the Great: King of Judea,” *History Cooperative* (11 March 2024), accessed on Nov. 30,

2025 at <https://historycooperative.org/king-herod-of-judea/>.

³ Dhar, *ibid.*

⁴ Dhar, *ibid.*

him. Any opponents, including family members, were immediately removed from the equation.” Meaning, killed. He executed one of his wives and three of his own children. Historians suspect he had a secret police (of sorts) to keep informed about and to control the opinions of the common people about him. Suggestions of revolt or protests against his rule were dealt with forcefully, quickly, and with no ‘due process.’ According to Jewish historian Josephus, Herod had a tremendously large personal guard of 2,000 soldiers.⁵

Of course, Herod is also known for the great architecture of Judea, and the temples that he built. But this too is not without its controversy, for these great expansions and building projects required a lot of funding. To pay for these projects, he heavily taxed the Judean people. And although the building projects provided employment opportunities to the Jews, they weren’t paid much, and the heavy taxation outweighed the wages. In short, “King Herod was a lavish spender and emptied the royal coffers to fund expensive and

unnecessary gifts to create a reputation of generosity and great wealth. This was looked upon with disapproval by his subjects,” especially the Jewish ones.⁶

So a Rev. Dr. Boyung Lee notes, “With these words—‘*In the time of Herod...*’ (Luke 1:5)—Luke’s Gospel grounds the birth of Jesus in a world shaped by violence, occupation, and fear. This was no golden age of peace or spiritual clarity—it was a time of survival under empire. Herod, the Roman-appointed ruler of Judea, governed with paranoia and cruelty. His power, secured through imperial alliance, was maintained by coercion, surveillance, and brutality. Luke situates the story of Jesus within these political realities. His Gospel is not only spiritual but political—resistance in the face of empire.”⁷

For Jews, life under Herod was hard and harsh. After all, Mary had to travel on a donkey nine months pregnant to a different city to give birth all for a census so that the Roman government could collect taxes to fund projects that Mary and Joseph

⁵ Dhar, *ibid.*

⁶ Dhar, *ibid.*

⁷ Rev. Dr. Boyung Lee, “Commentary on Luke 1:5-13; Lamentations 3:55-57,” *Sanctified Art What do you fear?*

Sermon Planning Guide for the First Sunday of Advent, ‘In the Time of King Herod, We Long for God to Break In’ (c. 2025), pg 6 accessed on Nov. 30, 2025 at sanctifiedart.org.

and Jesus would not see or experience the benefits of!

Externally, the political climate of the day was difficult for Jews like Mary and Joseph, Elizabeth and Zechariah. They never knew what edict or ‘rule from on high’ would come down on them next. Daily life was hard and unpredictable.

Perhaps this uncertainty and chaos sounds frighteningly familiar? The *external landscape* that surrounds the Christmas Story is fueled by fear, a fear we can relate to and understand today.

Now, let’s look at the *internal landscape* of fear in the characters of the Christmas Story. We know about their internal fear because of the repeated refrain of the angel, the divine messenger, who says again and again—“*do not be afraid.*” Say that with me, — “*do not be afraid.*”

This fear manifests in all kinds of ways.

Mary is greatly troubled when the angel appears to her to tell her she is pregnant. Thinking of the scandal of pregnancy outside of marriage and the exclusion and isolation this will bring, she

wonders what all this means? And into her shame and worry and concern, the divine messenger speaks: “***Do not be afraid...***” (Luke 1)

Joseph faces personal betrayal knowing his wife-to-be is going to have a baby by someone else and intense social stigma about his situation. He is restless and can’t sleep. And into his tossing and turning, his skepticism and hurt, the divine messenger speaks: “***Do not be afraid...***” (Matthew 1)

The **shepherds**, living out on the hills outside Bethlehem, were often distrusted by respectable people. Nomadic and alone as defenders of their sheep from night predators, they are terrified when an angel appears. And into their startled, protective postures, the divine messenger speaks: “***Do not be afraid...***” (Luke 2)

And, even before we read of the fear of Mary, Joseph, and the Shepherds, we read of the fear of the wise, elderly, faithful priest, **Zechariah**—“a man who had witnessed the fall of Judean independence and the beginning of Roman occupation. He [and his wife Elizabeth] longed for the coming Messiah and [they]

longed for a son.”⁸ Zechariah’s ‘want’ was as deep and weathered and ever-present as his wrinkles.

As Zechariah was doing his priestly duty offering incense, an angel appeared to him at the altar, and just the presence of that angel “terrified” Zechariah, and “fear overwhelmed him.” As Boyung Lee notes, “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. [So] together, these [two] words

describe [a] fear that doesn’t just visit—it settles [and makes its home in us]. [It’s a] fear that shapes our posture toward the world. Many of us know this kind of fear.”⁹

Zechariah certainly does. And into his startled overwhelm, his deeply embedded fear, and his decades old longing, the divine messenger speaks: “***Do not be afraid...***” (Luke 1).

Fear is not just present in the story of Jesus’ birth, it is part of his people’s story for generations. As we hear in our Old Testament text today, “the **author of Lamentations** cries out in personal pain [and existential anguish even] while his homeland is under Babylonian rule.”¹⁰ We can’t untangle personal fears from systemic realities. And into his depressed anguish the divine messenger speaks: “***Do not be afraid...***” (Lamentations 5).

So in religious exile, in homeland occupation, in longings that have lasted a lifetime, in unexpected announcements, in unwanted and ostracizing circumstances, in moments of betrayal and

⁸ Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity, “Theme Connections,” *Sanctified Art What do you fear? Sermon Planning Guide for the First Sunday of Advent, ‘In the Time of*

King Herod, We Long for God to Break In’ (c. 2025), pg 5, accessed on Nov. 30, 2025 at sanctifiedart.org.

⁹ Lee, *ibid*, pg 6.

¹⁰ Garrity, *ibid*, pg 5.

confusion and personal crisis—fear is present. And into that fear, the divine messenger speaks: ***“Do not be afraid...”***

It's clear from the biblical text, and from the pages of our own lives, that fear is ever-present. *And so is* the voice of divine presence saying over and over and over again to us: ***“Do not be afraid...”***

When we pay attention to this connection or correlation—of our deeply rooted fears being met by divine presence and assurance—we realize that fear often precedes transformation. Fear is on page 1 of the Good News! Fear can be an important gestational nutrient or pre-natal vitamin, if you will, that is part of preparing for the in-breaking of God in our lives. Because fear points to something deep within us and shows us what we *really* care about, or what we long for or desire. When we are afraid, it's because something big is at stake. Something matters.

“As we see in Zechariah and Elizabeth's story, many of our fears show up as longing. Like a deep ache inside us, we long for

a better world, a different story, a brighter future...How many years had Zechariah and Elizabeth been waiting, both for a son and a Messiah? [For personal fulfillment and spiritual deliverance?] What was it like for them to live under Herod's [terrifying] reign? Had they run out of hope?”¹¹ Hope for the possibility of parenthood and the possibility of freedom and autonomy for their people? They had been longing for so long, that the possibility of change was probably long gone from their imaginations.

And I imagine they had resigned themselves to make the most of each day, to try and be grateful for what they have instead of focusing on what they don't have, and to be as faithful as possible in their religious duties—trusting that these duties are pleasing to God and give their life purpose and meaning, because life ‘outside’ under Roman occupation was certainly demeaning, and devoid of meaning!

And I imagine that many of us here today know the kind of fear

¹¹ Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity, “Considerations for this Week,” *Sanctified Art What do you fear? Sermon Planning Guide for the First Sunday of Advent*. ‘In the

Time of King Herod, We Long for God to Break In’ (c. 2025), pg 5, accessed on Nov. 30, 2025 at sanctifiedart.org.

that gets normalized so much so that it turns into resignation.

“Like Zechariah, we may grow so used to disappointment that when hope finally arrives, it startles us. When God interrupts, we flinch. [But] when the [divine messenger] says, *‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard,’* it is not a dismissal. It is a reorientation. Your fear is real—and *it is not the only truth.*”¹²

There is always hope hiding in the corners and crevices of our fear. The hope that things could be different, the longing for them TO BE different.

“God [is always] listening. God enters the silence, the ache, the barrenness—into the very place where fear has taken root. And God’s response begins not with a miracle, but with recognition: *your prayer has been heard.*”¹³ Your fear is seen.

In Advent, we are invited to acknowledge our fears, not dismiss or ignore them. The biblical characters “move through their fears,” they don’t deny them. “They ask questions,

hold fast to courage, and say, *“Here I am, Lord.”*¹⁴ (I have no idea what your doing, but here am I!)

God is near in our fear, that is clear. And even more, if we are able to name what it is that we fear, we might just be able to discover that being afraid doesn’t mean “well, all hope is lost.” No, in fact, perhaps it is *in our fear* that hope is alive, surviving, finding its breath and voice, waiting for us to unearth the deepest desires and longings we want for our lives and our world. Maybe our fears have been protecting our hopes, waiting for us to be ready to truly open ourselves to the in-breaking of God in our lives.

Maybe this is what Phillips Brooks meant when we penned the lyrics to the beloved Christmas Carol:

*O little town of Bethlehem
How still we see thee lie
Above thy deep and dreamless
sleep
The silent stars go by
Yet in the dark streets shineth
The everlasting light*

¹² Lee, *ibid.*

¹³ Lee, *ibid.*

¹⁴ Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity, “Introduction, About the Theme,” *Sanctified Art What do you fear? Sermon*

*The hopes AND fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight*¹⁵

I invite you to begin this first week of Advent digging for the hope in your fears. What longings, hopes, or desires, does your fear reveal?

If my fear is being alone, perhaps the hope is that community and connection can be an antidote to my loneliness.

If my fear is dying of cancer, perhaps the hope I can find is in my attitude, since I can't change the outcome. Can I choose to live with cancer and cherish every day that have? Not letting it kill my spirit even as it kills my cells?

If my fear is my kids being safe in their school, perhaps the hope I find in that fear is a resolute courage to act. To work for policies that prevent gun violence and support mental health.

The hopes hidden in our fears often reveal attitudes or action-oriented change and transformation.

“Zechariah’s fear doesn’t disqualify him [from the Good News]. It marks the beginning of transformation. Even in his silence, he becomes part of the unfolding story—his life bearing witness to a God who hears, disrupts, and enters fearful places with grace [and hope].”¹⁶

“‘*In the time of Herod...*’ the world was loud with empire’s threats, echoing with grief and longing. And still—God broke in. In the time of fear, God heard a prayer. And responded with presence.”¹⁷

And this presence is what unearths hope. Because you see, all these individual divine messengers are preludes to a greater song—what would come to be called the “Good News.” **When Jesus is born in Bethlehem—“*In the Time of Herod...*”—Jesus’ physical birth, his very body and live, becomes THE divine messenger speaking: “*Do not be afraid...*” to All of Humanity. To you and to me. To all generations. All people in all places. **Jesus not just the ultimate divine messenger, he IS the very message himself—the *Word made Flesh*. Which****

¹⁵ Lyrics accessed on Nov. 30, 2025 at https://hymnary.org/text/o_little_town_of_bethlehem.

¹⁶ Lee, *ibid*.

¹⁷ Lee, *ibid*.

means it is His Life, His Words, and His Love that ultimately show us how to live with hope even as we live in fear-filled times.

Hope is the heartbeat of this season, after all.

MaryAnn McKibben Dana begins in her book, *Hope: A User's Manual*, by describing all the things Hope is *Not*. And of all the things she lists that Hope is not, she begins with the one we probably all need to hear the most: *Hope is Not a Prediction*: “When we say we’re hopeful, we often follow it with a ‘that.’ I’m hopeful *that* the chemo will work. I’m hopeful *that* I’ll find a job soon. I’m hopeful *that* the new meds will help curb the depression. There’s nothing wrong with hope that points in a particular direction. But when the world is falling apart, it can be hard to find a suitable ‘*that*’ to complete the sentence...Our first step [to lasting hope] is to divorce ‘hope’ from ‘*that*’...to embrace hope [not as a predictor of a desired outcome but] as mysterious and open ended and see where that takes us.”¹⁸

This Advent, we hear the divine messenger say, “***Do not be afraid...***” as an invitation to unearth the Hope in our fears, and if those hopes are attached to outcomes, to tenderly detach them, and let Hope live on its own...expectantly waiting to see how God will break in...and will be birthed...

McKibben Dana also says, *Hope is not Cause and Effect*: “I sometimes want hope to be like this: basically reliable, a straight line from cause to effect. If a cook knows their way around a kitchen and can follow instructions, they will generally yield a predictable result. The life of a cook is studded with occasional failures, and there’s always more to learn, but the basic procedures are fixed. Assuming good ingredients, a trustworthy recipe, and competent skills, you will get an edible result. But I suspect a truly robust hope is more like gardening than baking. Gardening is different from following a recipe, because so much is out of one’s control. The quality of the soil. How hungry and determined the critters are. How much rain will come, or came last year. Heat

¹⁸ MaryAnn McKibben Dana, *Hope: A User's Manual* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2022), pgs 8-9.

waves. An early frost. As with cooking, gardeners learn and improve through trial and error. But in the end, it's out of their hands. Plus, the time horizon is much longer. Those little seeds nuzzle in the ground for a long time. There is waiting. There is watching... This is bad news for those of us who are used to achieving measurable results. It's not that we shouldn't seek to be effective. But I'm realizing how often we substitute competence for hope. Hope acknowledges how much is beyond our control, and how easily cause and effect can slip out of gear."¹⁹

This Advent, we hear the divine messenger say, "***Do not be afraid...***" as an invitation to be faithful in the midst of our fear, acknowledging there is little we can control beyond our own actions and attitude.

In fact, McKibben Dana opens her whole book with this thought: "You've probably seen the line emblazoned on posters and paperweights: What would you do if you knew you could not fail? When the world's on fire, a better question may be: What is worth doing even if you

think you will fail? Once we can answer that question, we'll be in touch with a hope that cannot fail us."²⁰ Or as Sarah Speed says, "*If you were to ask me 'What do you fear?' my answer would be: 'A world without hope.'*"²¹

Another way to ask, *What do you fear?* is to ask, *What do you long for, or hope for?* For underneath whatever we fear, there is a pulsing longing, a desire for something to be different than it is right now... a chance for transformation and change to happen. A hope that is beyond what we can see or know today.

Phillips Brooks was right: "*the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*" But if our hopes and fears are met in the Christ Child, in Emmanuel (God-with-us), then I believe our hopes and fears are met inside each one of us as well. Our lives are the womb of God's in-breaking presence in the world today.

This Advent, what if we didn't have to dismiss or deny our fear in order to welcome the new thing God is doing in our

¹⁹ McKibben Dana, pgs 21-23.

²⁰ McKibben Dana, pg 4.

²¹ Rev. Sarah Speed, "Theme Reflections from Sanctified Art Team," *Sanctified Art What do you fear?*

Sermon Planning Guide (c. 2025), pg 2, accessed on Nov. 30, 2025 at sanctifiedart.org.

lives...what if we saw our fear
as the womb that holds our
hope? Recognizing that there is
life within our fears, hope
preparing to emerge...

And as we wait and watch with
wonder and hope, may we not
forget to tune our ears to the
voice of the divine messenger,
as these angelic words cascade
down through the generations
and speak tenderly to us, too,
saying: ***“Do not be afraid...”***

Amen.