

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Alive in the Adventure of Jesus: Talking Turkey
Rev. Amy Morgan
November 27, 2016

Isaiah 40:9-11, Luke 1:67-79

It was a tense Thanksgiving. I'm sure we all tried to avoid it. Talk about football, the kids, the weather – ANYTHING. But the subject always comes up. Maybe it was inadvertent, a reference to something you didn't even know you were making. But before you knew it, there was shouting, people were throwing napkins, relatives were storming out of the room. I don't know when we'll ever be able to talk peaceably about *turkey again.

It's sad, isn't it? That we can't just all agree about turkey? Some people want to make it like it was back in the day. It was better then, they say. More honest and true. Others demand we change with the times, use the turkey-making technology available to us, incorporate a more diverse selection of turkey techniques. You can grill it, deep fry it, put it in a bag. You can even make vegetarian turkey. Which is the most horrific thing ever to those turkey traditionalists.

We can't agree. There is too much at stake. We are talking about THANKSGIVING, people. This day only comes around once a year. You get ONE SHOT to gather with family members you spend most of the year avoiding, ONE SHOT to try to enjoy each other's company, ONE SHOT to try to shed the baggage of old resentments. And turkey drives a stake through the heart of that effort every time. Turkey divides us like nothing else.

Because, really, turkey defines our values. You tell me how you want to cook your turkey, and I can tell you everything I need to know about you. And in times of fear and uncertainty, the talk about turkey really heats up. People who used to keep their opinions about turkey to themselves now suddenly feel called to speak out. There's no compromising on turkey the way we used to: You can cook it in the bag as long as you use grandma's mixture of herbs and spices. No, it's all or nothing, this way or that, the whole enchilada. (Don't even get me going on turkey enchiladas).

And at the end of the day, after the name-calling, bruised egos, and encampments of family refusing to speak to one another, we end up with a cold bird no one has the stomach for, no matter how it was cooked in the end. Fear makes turkey so much tougher. It makes a lot of things tougher. *Just ask Isaiah. Or Zechariah. They both lived in times of fear, fear that was real, fear that divided communities, tore apart families.

As John has talked about before, the prophesy of Isaiah was written throughout three distinct periods in the history of God's people. The first part of Isaiah is written to a people in fear of attack, people willing to make a deal with the devil to save their collective hide. The second part of Isaiah, where we find the text we heard this morning, is written to a people who have been defeated, who are living in exile, fearful of losing their identity, their values, their faith. The third part of Isaiah is written as those exiles begin to return to the ruins of their former kingdom, fearful that they will never recover from the desolation of their homeland.

*Fear permeates each part of this prophesy. Fear that is real. Fear of loss of power, loss of place, loss of identity, loss of hope. Prophesy often emerges in times of fear. Prophets are able to answer those hard

questions fear brings up: “why is this happening?” “What are we supposed to do?” “How can we change our situation?” When we are tempted to place blame, find a scapegoat, entrench ourselves in seclusions of safety, prophets call us to see God’s plan, do God’s will, and live in new ways. Brian McLaren says that prophets as the custodians of the “best hopes, desires, and dreams of their society.”

*Unlike Isaiah, Zechariah wasn’t a known prophet of the people of Israel. He’s often a minor, forgotten character in the cast of the nativity of Jesus. In fact, Luke’s gospel is the only one that makes any mention of him at all. But it is a significant dimension of his gospel narrative. Each gospel writer begins in a different way, to make a different point about the life of Jesus. Matthew begins with a genealogy of Jesus. Mark jumps right into the adult John the Baptist preaching in the wilderness. And John begins with his mystical prologue about the Word of God.

But Luke, he begins with Zechariah. Zechariah, a priest who was “righteous before God,” “living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord.” But he and his wife were “getting on in years” and had no children. Zechariah’s story is a narrative of fear. Living in first-century Palestine, under the rule of the Roman Empire, his people had much to fear. Their way of life was eroding, they were being crippled with taxes, their leaders were compromising their deepest-held values to gain favor with the Emperor.

Zechariah personally had plenty to fear as well. He and his wife were getting on in years, and they had no children. No one to care for them as they aged, to protect them in a society where only the able-bodied flourished. Childlessness not only made a couple vulnerable; it made them a disgrace. The only reasonable explanation, according to the theology of the day, was that they had displeased God in some way. They may have appeared to be righteous and blameless, but some secret sin must be keeping them barren.

When Zechariah’s lot is drawn, and he’s tasked with burning incense in the sanctuary, he is gripped by another kind of fear - when an angel of God appears to him. The angel’s first words to him are, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah.”

*Over a hundred and fifty times throughout scripture, we hear these words. Do not be afraid. When God comes to the childless Abram in a vision; when God comes to comfort the destitute Hagar in the wilderness; when Moses encourages the Israelites as they flee Egypt, facing the abyss of the Red Sea. From the Israelite prophets we hear these words. Isaiah saying, “do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God.” Zechariah’s namesake, in his ancient prophesy, saying, “Do not be afraid, but let your hands be strong.” In a dream, Joseph hears “do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife.” An angel tells Mary “do not be afraid, for you have found favor with God.” The angels tell the shepherds, “Do not be afraid, for I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.”

Do not be afraid.

You’d think we’d get it. And yet. Here we are. Afraid. Filled with fear, in fact. Afraid for ourselves. Afraid for our nation. Afraid for our world.

The stakes are high. The consequences are dire. We all have something to lose. We fear that our way of life is eroding. We fear economic instability. We fear that our values are not being represented. No matter how you cook your turkey. We are all afraid.

And at the risk of being labeled a Star Wars fanatic, I'm going to quote Yoda once again. You all know this one. *"Fear is the path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering." My son keeps quoting this to me. And I'm grateful for the reminder.

This is more than good advice. It is a prophesy. And in times of fear, prophesy is what we need. Prophesy that calls us to see God's plan, do God's will, and live in new ways. *Prophets like Martin Luther King, Jr., who said that "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." *Prophets like Dietrich Bonhoeffer who wrote, "We must learn to regard people less in light of what they do or omit to do, and more in the light of what they suffer." Prophets like Zechariah who proclaimed that God had raised up a mighty savior so that we might serve God *without fear*.

The Bible's repetitive instruction, "do not be afraid," is nothing less than an essential component to God's redemptive plan for the creation. Because if we try to serve God *with* fear, what we end up with is self-preservation, which some theologians assert is the origin of all human sin. Serving God *with* fear means that we claim God for our side over and against our enemy rather than acknowledging God's love for our enemy, seeing them as a fellow human being made in God's image. Serving God *with* fear means that we claim God's blessing and favor, believing that we deserve what we have been given and more, and that those who are in need are outside of God's beloved and chosen ones. Serving God *with* fear is a dangerous path to the dark side, and one we have travelled many times.

The call to serve God without fear is one of the most profound calls we can hear and answer. It is the call of the prophet. It is the calling *to* the prophet. Zechariah's prophesy is fulfilled in his son, John, the one who calls God's people to repentance, who will make ready a people prepared to serve God without fear. Serving God without fear is the opposite of self-preservation. It calls us to self-sacrifice. It calls us to follow the One who would sacrifice all, who would give up his life on a cross.

So my question for us today is: are we those people prepared to serve God without fear? Can we be prophetic in this time of fear, proclaiming the love and justice, the *good news* of Jesus Christ? Maybe, if we can do this, next Thanksgiving we will live into Zechariah's prophesy. We will know forgiveness, the "dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death." We will see Martin Luther King's prophesy of the arc of the universe bending toward justice. We will experience Dietrich Bonhoeffer's prophesy, seeing people in light of what they suffer.

And maybe then, we can all enjoy some turkey. Amen.