



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
 Asheville, North Carolina
 5 December 2021
 Sermon: The Early Shift
 Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

Luke 1:68-79

Luke 1:68-79 New Revised Standard Version

⁶⁸ “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
 for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.
⁶⁹ He has raised up a mighty savior for us
 in the house of his servant David,
⁷⁰ as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
⁷¹ that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.
⁷² Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
 and has remembered his holy covenant,
⁷³ the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
 to grant us ⁷⁴ that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
 might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness
 before him all our days.
⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
 for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to his people
 by the forgiveness of their sins.
⁷⁸ By the tender mercy of our God,
 the dawn from on high will break upon us,
⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
 to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

I Worried

*I worried a lot... Was I right, was I wrong, will I be forgiven, can I do better?*¹

These words by the poet Mary Oliver perhaps echo the thoughts of Zechariah, priest in the order of Abijah, who in his old age was visited by the angel Gabriel while lighting incense in the Temple. “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John” (1:13). As in, John the Baptist.

But Zechariah questioned the angel, “How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man” (1:18).

Have you ever wanted something your whole life long, and worried it will not come?

To worry is human. In a culture where children were a sign of honor and fortune, where children were often the only lifeline to parents in old age, and after the parents were gone, the only way to carry a family name and trade forward, Zechariah prayed for children his whole life long. Prayed and worried, worried and prayed.

Do you ever find yourself in that cycle, where each succeeding thought is worse than the last? Zechariah, whose name means ‘God remembered,’ thought God had forgotten, perhaps that God was displeased, or worse, apathetic, or worse, perhaps, that there was no one listening at the other end of the line. So, Zechariah waited, and waited, as time moved forward.

“I worried a lot... Was I right, was I wrong, will I be forgiven, can I do better?” asked Mary Oliver.

Zechariah was stuck in that cycle, when the angel of the Lord appeared before him. So much so that he could not believe what the angel said. “How will I know that this is so?” And so, Gabriel left Zechariah mute, “because you did not believe my words” (1:20).

One of our participants in the Wednesday morning Bible study this week suggested that perhaps Zechariah’s muteness was more blessing than curse,

¹ Mary Oliver, “I Worried,” in *Swan: Poems and Prose Poems* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), 39.

because it stopped those wheels in his head of worry and disbelief, upsetting an inner monologue of worry that had been on repeat through the decades.

For at the other end of the story, months later on the day of baby John the Baptist's circumcision, his father Zechariah's mouth finally opened in a song of praise:

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for God has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them...God has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that God swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies might serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness before the Lord all our days.”

The wheels of worry stopped, and Zechariah, seeing that God was doing a new thing in the world, proclaimed that we, “might serve God without fear.”

Without fear. What does it mean to serve God without fear? Have you ever served God without fear?²

What does that even mean today? When a new coronavirus variant, so much still unknown about it, arises and threatens what little recovery we've made in an 18 months long pandemic.

When another school shooting happens, and four teenagers die, their lives lost just as they were beginning, and our country, our government barely takes notice; we move on because this has become business as usual.

When the Supreme Court signals it is ready to end any semblance of reproductive justice in this country, a weight that will fall, as it always does, on those most pushed to the margins.

And that's just since Thanksgiving.

I Worried

I worried a lot... Was I right, was I wrong, will I be forgiven, can I do better?

² In this exegesis, I'm indebted to entries by Roger J. Gench and Robin Gallaher Branch, “Luke 1:68-79,” in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vo. 1*, edited by David L Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 32-37.

Have you ever served God without fear?

To worry is human; when it spurs us to take the actions we need, it is good and useful. But like Zechariah, we get stuck in worry. It can stop us from seeing what God is doing in the world (pause).

“Critical race theory says every white person is a racist,” Senator Ted Cruz has said. “It basically teaches that certain children are inherently bad people because of the color of their skin,” said the Alabama state legislator Chris Pringle.

These quotes come from a recent article in *The Atlantic* by Boston University professor Ibram X. Kendi, author of a book our racial justice series recently read together, *How to Be an Antiracist*.³

Kendi is writing in the midst of a recent election cycle that weaponized fear, that mobilized white racial anxiety. Lately, you can’t turn on cable news without hearing CRT, CRT, CRT. Kendi is one of the leading voices in the Antiracist movement today. He points out in the article that, as much as Critical Race Theory has been talked about in recent months, it has seldom honestly been engaged, or even accurately defined.

“They have conjured an imagined monster to scare the American people and project themselves as the nation’s defenders from that fictional monster,” writes Kendi.

Charles Blow, in a recent editorial, points out that this strategy is anything but new: “In fact, he says, “the frenzy around critical race theory is just the latest in a long line of manufactured outrages meant to tap into this same fear.”⁴

Blow recounts how white racial anxiety was mobilized after *Brown vs. Board of Education*, 1954; The “Southern Strategy” of the 1960s; Regan’s welfare queen; Bush’s Willie Horton ad; Clinton’s superpredators. And on and on, centuries before, and decades after. Fear as a weapon. Fear as a bludgeon.

³ Ibram X. Kendi, “There Is No Debate Over Critical Race Theory,” *The Atlantic*, July 9, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/07/opponents-critical-race-theory-are-arguing-themselves/619391/>

⁴ Charles Blow, “White Racial Anxiety Strikes Again,” *The New York Times*, Nov. 3, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/03/opinion/youngkin-virginia-race.html>

Like Zechariah, fear can stop us from seeing what God is doing in the world.

And like Charles Blow, I fear this mobilization of fear. The ways fear will be militarized to tear communities apart in this nation, a weight that will fall, as it always does, on those most pushed to the margins.

The angel says to Zechariah, “Do not be afraid,” as angels do, though I have trouble imagining my life right now, without a slight, and healthy dose of fear.

But some days, my own worries move around in circles in my head, one worry leads to another, one thought catastrophizing the next, so that Zechariah’s peace feels far off. The God who liberates us, “so that we might serve without fear” seems so distant.

And that is why I come back to services like this. Where liturgies and hymns, where sermons and prayers do not pull me from the worries of this world, but rather focus me on “the dawn from on high” that Zechariah sang about, that which “give[s] light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death” and “guide[s] our feet into the way of peace.”

Do not let your fears stop you from seeing how God is moving in this world,
for the Spirit moves;
she breathes new energy;
she shines forth as a new dawn;
she works even and especially in the most remote, the unexpected of places.
Like the temple of a small conquered nation at the edge of the Roman Empire.
Like the living room or kitchen that has become in this hour a sanctuary.

Do not let fear stop you from hearing the invitation to join God’s work in this world. Do not let fear cloud out God’s peace.

As they often are, here Mary Oliver’s full words are instructive:

I Worried

*I worried a lot. Will the garden grow, will the rivers
flow in the right direction, will the earth turn
as it was taught, and if not how shall
I correct it?*

*Was I right, was I wrong, will I be forgiven,
can I do better?*

*Will I ever be able to sing, even the sparrows
can do it and I am, well,
hopeless.*

*Is my eyesight fading or am I just imagining it,
am I going to get rheumatism,
lockjaw, dementia?*

Finally, I saw that worrying had come to nothing.

*And gave it up. And took my old body
and went out into the morning,
and sang.*

May it be so for us all.
And Peace be with you, siblings in Christ. Peace be with you.