



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

Between Hopes and the Fears

SCRIPTURE:
1 Kings 19:1-10

November 13, 2022 — Sermon by Rev. Zach Walker

Think, if you would, about something you are afraid of. Something you fear. It could be something trivial or it could be something significant. And, if you are able, think a bit about where that fear comes from—maybe it is based on an experience, maybe it lives too deep in the recesses of some long-forgotten childhood memory.

Think, too, about the ways this fear affects your life. Are there things or places you avoid because of it? Do others know about this particular fear or is it something private, unspoken?

When I was younger, I was afraid of dogs. I'm not exactly sure where the fear came from. There's family lore that a large dog lived next door when I was very little and it knocked me down. I don't remember that, so if it did happen, it's fascinating to me that the fear lived on but the inciting incident was lost to me. I do remember that by the time we moved to Georgia when I was about five, the fear of dogs was very real for me. I remember having recurring nightmares where I was being attacked by them.

So when we arrived in our new neighborhood, I discovered with dread that the Carlsens next door had a dog with the menacing name of Muffin. Muffin wasn't a big dog. But she ruled my existence. The Carlsens didn't have a fenced-in yard, so Muffin had free rein around the property. If the dog was outside, I was inside.

Sometimes I wouldn't even go outside because of the fear that they might let Muffin out while I was there. I was no longer afraid of an actual dog; now I feared the possibility of the dog.

I think much of our lives are lived between hope, on the one hand, and fear on the other. We live, in a way, constantly between hope and fear. We hold both. We live both. We are pendulums in motion, rocking

back and forth—at once both fearful and hopeful.

Many of life's choices can be made in retreat from our fears and in our reaching for our hopes. It can feel like we exist in between them—running away from one while trying to simultaneously draw nearer to the other.

Think about some of the biggest decisions you have made in your life. Take a minute and just hold two or three in your mind. I bet you could categorize those decisions as either rooted in fear or guided by hope. And a question worth reflecting on in this Advent time, this waiting time, is: Which one, hope or fear, guides more of your decisions? Which one gets more space in your life? And no matter what your answer is to that question, how can any of us—all of us—give more space to hope in our own lives or inspire more hope in the lives of those around us?

In the coming weeks, we are going to hear about Mary and Zechariah, two people who can teach us a great deal about hope and I think it is worth noting that their hopefulness wasn't without their own doses of fear. Mary was dealing with the fears of what Joseph would do or think, in addition to what her culture and community would say and do, about her pregnancy. For the duration of her pregnancy, and perhaps even for the rest of her life, Mary would not have been unaware of the whispers, the stares, the judgment. But this child came with a lot of promises, a lot of hope. So what would she choose? And would she choose it out of hope or out of fear?

Zechariah is in many ways the exact opposite of Mary. He is a man. He's old. He's an important religious figure. And while he wanted a child, at his age, I have to imagine news of impending fatherhood came with its own fears and concerns. Perhaps his biggest fear was that the child would never come. Sometimes the biggest fear of all is that we would dare to hope,

only to be met with disappointment. So would he live in hope or in fear?

But today we are talking about Elijah. It isn't really a typical Advent scripture, is it? We meet Elijah today after he has just done something amazing. He has gone head-to-head with the prophets of Baal—400 of them—and Elijah has prevailed. It was surely a high point in his prophetic service to God. But his actions anger Queen Jezebel, who threatens his life, "By this time tomorrow," she vows, "I'll make you just as dead as they are."

Well, Elijah freaks. He takes off—literally heads for the hills to hide away. He is alone. His life is in danger. He feels lost. He feels afraid.

What is his fear? To paraphrase, he says to God, "I'm alone, and at the mercy of the powers of this world, at the mercy of that which I cannot control and it will be my undoing—and I can't bear it by myself." I've felt that way. How about you?

I think we are still processing how these past three years have felt that way. The ways in which so many of us felt isolated. Studies by the Worldwide Health Organization find that the pandemic triggered a 25% increase in the prevalence of anxiety and depression worldwide.¹ During the pandemic, 40% of adults in the U.S. reported feeling symptoms of anxiety and depression.² Many of these symptoms spring from issues related to isolation.

If there's one thing fear can do to us, it is make us feel alone and stuck. It is clear that Elijah feels stuck. Fear has a way of holding him—holding us—in place. It prevents us from living courageously. Fear can hem us in. It can prevent us from healing the wounds we have suffered in this life. It can also, because of shame, keep us away from relationships that are good for us. Fear can, if we let it, keep us cooped up inside while it runs amok in the neighbor's yard next door.

But here's the thing: I think fear and hope live close to each other. I think, handled properly, fear can speak to hope and hope can transform fear. In fact, sometimes, I think our hopes spring directly out of our fears. Here's what I mean by that.

When I was about 12, I decided this fear of dogs

was... for the dogs. I decided we needed a dog in the family and probably best to get a big one. So, out of the blue, I told my parents we needed to get a moderately sized St. Bernard. They didn't go for that. But we did get a Maltese named Taffy. And Taffy broke me of my fear. I stand before you now as a person who loves dogs. I'm a dog person these days (no offense to the cat people out there). I love dogs. Meredith and I have two dogs. If I'm ever at your house and you have a dog, I will befriend your dog.

Because sometimes, our fears get transformed. Every dog I meet is a reminder that fear can be transformed. Sometimes unlocking our fear can help us find our way to hope.

Elijah never states his hope; he is focused on and trapped by his fears. But if hopes and fears are related, we can make some guesses at his hopes.

His fear is that he's all alone. His hope, then, I want to suggest, is that God's work is not his alone to do. He hopes to find someone aimed at the same things in life and as concerned with God's mission and kingdom as Elijah is—someone who is courageous for God.

I think we do well as the Advent season begins to think a bit about our fears. Not dwell on them, *per se*. But let's name them. Let's share them. Let's share them first and foremost with God because I think being honest with God about our fears is important.

When I was in seminary, one of my summer jobs was working at a camp near Santa Cruz, California, called Mount Hermon. I worked at the family camp with the college students who were there, but one of the weeks of camp was homeschool week. There aren't a lot of college homeschoolers, so I worked with high school that week. And on the opening night, we had all these homeschool kids there for programming and after about 30 minutes, Beth, who was in charge, noticed a student was missing.

We all tried to play cool while people looked for this kid and Beth found him just outside the building, sitting by himself. She went over and asked if everything was okay and this kid said that he was just afraid, so he was praying.

1 www.who.int/news/item/02-03-2022-covid-19-pandemic-triggers-25-increase-in-prevalence-of-anxiety-and-depression-worldwide

2 www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/the-implications-of-covid-19-for-mental-health-and-substance-use/

Beth asked him what he was afraid of and this awesome and shy high-schooler said, “Well, I’m just afraid I won’t make any friends this week, so I was praying to God to help give me some friends.”

And Beth, in her wisdom, said, “Well, that’s a great prayer. How about we go back inside to where all the people are—that’s probably where God has put some of those friends.”

Elijah isn’t too different from that kid. He’s honest about what’s going on. “I did all these things for you, God. And yet here I am, all alone, and I am hunted. How do you expect me to feel?”

And God hears Elijah. More than that, I think God takes Elijah’s fear, transforms it into hope, and then responds. Right after what we read today, God says, “Listen for me, for I am coming.” And in the quiet, Elijah hears God’s voice saying: You’ve got to get to where some people are. Get off that lonely mountain of fear. And if you can bring yourself to do that, you’re going to meet Elisha, and the two of you will be the Bert & Ernie, the Johnny & June, the Fred Astaire & Ginger Rogers, the Patrick Mahomes & Travis Kelce of the prophetic world.

When I read this part of Elijah’s story, I wonder if maybe, just maybe, part of dealing with our fears, part of what transforms them into hopes, is to open them up to God—to begin that conversation. But I also want to challenge you to share that conversation with someone close to you. When we talk about our fears with others, we take a step toward revealing the hope hidden in that fear.

We want to hear what some of your fears and hopes are—to share them with each other as well as offer them to God, so I encourage you to stop by Friendship Hall and see the display Pastor Hallie has

made. You can write down some of your hopes and fears and hang them on the wall. It will be a reminder of what fears we are struggling with, as well as the hopes we are yearning for. A reminder of how each and every one of us is in the process of transforming. A reminder that we need a God who meets us when we aren’t feeling quite ready yet.

The holiday season always finds me unprepared. This season seems to catch us when we aren’t quite ready. Life is busy and I am focused on everything except hope, peace, joy and love. I get distracted. Some fears are too close and some hopes are too far away. If you feel that way, I’m here to tell you: That’s okay.

I think God’s love meets us exactly where we are and exactly as we are. It met Zechariah just like that. And Mary. And Elijah. That love meets us right here as we live between our hopes and our fears; it speaks to us in the face of our fears. It addresses us in the joys of our hopes.

We are preparing for the arrival of Christ and Jesus does not enter a perfect world that is fully prepared or without fear. Jesus comes to a broken and beautiful world that, frankly, is kind of laughably not ready for him (there literally wasn’t a room for him when he was born!).

So if you are thinking you aren’t ready yet, well... join the club, my friends! Welcome to the parade that is all of us—the parade of the not-yet-ready, the stumbling along, the running from fear one minute and reaching for hope the next.

But we are stumbling along *together*, which I think counts for something. Together we can feel a little less alone in our fears. And together we feel a lot more encouraged toward our hopes.