



Before the Angel Appears

TEXT
Luke 1:5–25

December 6, 2015 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

My friends Michael and Terri were traveling by train with their family of three small children. They were negotiating Grand Central Station in New York. They headed toward the ticket counter, but their son Benjamin somehow went a different direction. In an instant, he was nowhere to be seen. Security guards were called. The station was scoured. It was a nightmare.

After a seeming eternity, Michael saw the back of Benjamin's head. Michael said, "Benjamin?" Ben turned around calmly and said, "Yes?" Michael said, "We were looking for you and couldn't find you. Weren't you frightened?"

Ben said, "No, I knew you'd come."

I want to learn to wait like that. When you are waiting, it's hard to keep confidence in what you are waiting for.

Luke tells us that the old priest Zechariah was in the temple. He was there to burn incense and to pray. He had done this before, and it was his turn to do so again. It looks like he is just doing his temple duty, but what he is really doing is waiting. To wait well is hard work. When we

are waiting, it's hard to maintain confidence in that for which we wait. I don't wait well.

You granted me a sabbatical several summers ago. It was early in the sabbatical, and I was studying at the seminary. I didn't have a car, so I walked to a McDonald's — back when I did that kind of thing. It was breakfast time, and I wanted a cup of coffee — that was all, just a cup of coffee.

There was a guy in line in front of me. She asked, "May I take your order?"

"Give me just a minute," he said. I thought, here we go. "I just can't decide," he said. "I was going to get pancakes, but that Egg McMuffin looks good. Is the Egg McMuffin good here?" What do you mean is it good? It will kill you. The cashier and I made eye contact. I just wanted a cup of coffee.

"I'm thinking," the man said. And I was thinking, "How can you not know what you want? They haven't changed the menu in 40 years. Just get the biscuit, man!" I started to walk out and go find coffee somewhere else. I didn't have all day. But then I started laughing at myself. I was on sabbatical. I didn't have an appointment for three months. What was I in such a hurry for?

I have found waiting to be hard work — not only because of the battle between patience and impatience; but even more so because it grows increasingly difficult to maintain hope in that for which we wait.

Zechariah is in the temple. He is praying. He is burning incense. But what he is really doing is waiting. He had been waiting all his life.

The angel Gabriel appeared to him, and that wait that had defined Zechariah's life was finally coming into reality. He and Elizabeth had longed for a child. They had prayed for years for a child that was not coming. Infertility was a common problem in the ancient world — and it is a common problem today. I know that reading a story like this can touch tender places.

There is a risk in reading this story. Gabriel says, "Do not be afraid, for your prayer has been heard; your wife will bear a son."

It doesn't always work this way. Sometimes there is a child; sometimes the child never comes. If you, or someone you love, feel the angel has passed you by — even when your head knows better — it's hard for the heart not to wonder if it is because you haven't prayed enough or your prayers haven't been good

enough. Let me say, that's not it. Life is not a computer that can be programmed to bring us the results that we wish.

Infertility is not punishment or that God is not listening. Sometimes there is just heartbreak. Heartbreak comes to us all in some fashion. This sermon is not about infertility. But because I know these stories can touch tender places, I just need to name the pain and refute the simple read that prayer will always result in the gift of a child. Sometimes there is just heartbreak.

The intent of this sermon is to think about life before the angel appears. That is where most of life is lived. Throughout much of life, we are waiting for things that matter, and many never seem to come.

Before the angel appears, we find Zechariah in the temple. Most of Zechariah's life was lived before the angel appears. From the time he was a young man, he would come to the temple to pray, study Torah, burn incense and plead with God for a son. But there was no sign from God. And now, he's an old man.

Still, Zechariah makes his way to the temple — not because he is convinced the answer to his prayer will be found there, but because it is the best place he knows to be when there are no answers. When his tomorrow seems uncertain, he does what his faith teaches him to do. He prays; he studies scripture; and he waits.

The candle we light this Second Sunday of Advent is the candle of peace. I wonder if sometimes it should be called

“the candle of barrenness.” Peace feels like the child that will never be born among us. We have prayed and pleaded for peace and grieved its delay, but there have been no angels appearing. So we wait.

That was the message that we planned for today — but then the news of San Bernardino filled our week. So what is the preacher to do? We could ignore it and just sit in the warmth of the candlelight. I could drop a gloss in — notice it, but not offer any thoughts from the faith. Or we could talk about it.

I will be honest. I am growing weary of trying to find the words to speak into the ocean of grief that follows these brutal attacks. And I am weary of the paralysis of our leaders which reveals an apparent unwillingness to respond to what is an obvious problem in our country.

On Wednesday, we learned that another mass shooting had occurred. How many is this now? There was Columbine, Virginia Tech and Newtown. There was the Amish town, Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. There were eight people shot in Tyrone, Missouri, in February. There are others — but how many?

I have learned that there is a debate on how we define a mass shooting. So if you allow this definition — a mass shooting is four or more people being shot — then Wednesday was the 353rd time we have experienced a mass shooting in this country this year. We are averaging more than one a day.

Three years ago, one week after we lit the candle of peace,

we came to our sanctuary — stunned by the senseless violence of Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. I hoped something would happen in the wake of Sandy Hook.

This summer, Mother Emanuel Church became the point of focus; I thought something might happen then.

But we are again wading through this typical American experience of senseless gun violence. We pray for peace, but it appears that peace requires us to do something or pay for something or give up something — and it is not evident we are willing. What do we do? Some will say this is a Muslim problem.

A few weeks ago, a man named Samar Shalaby presented plans to the zoning board in Fredericksburg, Virginia. He was presenting plans to update a local mosque in that community. Then a member of the community said this: “Nobody wants your evil cult in this town.” He went on: “I will do everything in my power to make sure that this does not happen. Because you are terrorists. Every one of you are terrorists. I don't care what you say. I don't care what you think. ... Every Muslim is a terrorist.”¹ The crowds cheered and applauded.

Something very bad is happening among us. What was applauded in that zoning board meeting was bigotry. Whether it is against Syrians or Muslims or any people, when they are excluded or oppressed because of who they are — not what they have done — it is bigotry. Again

we have to decide as a nation if we want to be bigger than bigotry or not. Our answer is not evident.

The Islamic Society of North America has publicly stated: “Islam strictly condemns extremism and the use of violence against innocent lives. There is no justification in Islam for extremism or terrorism.”² They declare terrorism to be a violation of Islam. If they are right, then what is going on?

Religious historian Karen Armstrong says the most surprising development of the 20th century has been the emergence in Islam, but also in Judaism and Christianity, of a militant piety called fundamentalism.³

Fundamentalism is a misread of one’s religious tradition that, while not always, but all too often, results in a theological justification for hating those who do not adhere to their views. When religion can justify hatred of the neighbor, violence doesn’t have to follow — but too often it does. Religious fundamentalists are so certain that their views of God are right, that destruction of others who do not share those same views is seen as pleasing to God.

It was religious fundamentalists who attacked us on 9/11. In the name of Allah, they attacked and murdered innocent people. But almost immediately, in the name of Jesus, Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson said the attack was God’s will because of the sinful and secular ways of America.⁴ Christian and Islamic fundamentalists agree: The attack was God’s will.

Just as moderate Muslims condemned violence done in the

name of Islam, every moderate Christian should condemn justification of violence done in the name of Jesus.

Some of you in this room will say this is a mental health issue. We need to do a better job of treating gun violence as a health issue. The only way to stop this violence is to provide treatment for those captured by such hatred.

But our leaders are not able to find a way to fund what is needed. For reasons I cannot comprehend, we can’t find a way to fund advances in mental health care. If this is a mental health issue, then we need to muster the will to do something about it.

Twenty years ago (1993), the Center for Disease Control released a study on gun violence as a health issue. The NRA didn’t like the results of the CDC’s study. The NRA pressured Congress, and Congress redirected the funds from the CDC.⁵ It seems an obvious wisdom that the CDC, and not the NRA, should be determining health research for us.

Some of you in this room will say it is not enough to enhance mental health treatment, but we need to enact sensible gun laws also. They will say it is actually not a “place-no-limits” attitude toward guns that makes us free as a society. To register, to background check, to forbid owning an AR-15 or an AK-47 is not violating essential freedom. They will say that we have learned something about “well-regulated” entities in our country — regulations on our medicines and on our foods; regulations on

how one can drive a car or build a building have their benefits. Being a well-regulated society can often serve safety and neighborliness. You will ask, “Why should guns stand outside of this lesson well learned?”

That seems to be the conversation, but then nothing happens. Instead, our leaders become fundamentalists. They call the other side crazy, and nothing happens.

I have a modest suggestion — so modest that I am almost embarrassed to state it: It’s time for us to stop saying the other side is crazy. It’s time for us to set aside our own fundamentalisms. Fundamentalism is the cancer that is destroying us. It’s time for us to stop assuming that those who don’t see this like I do are crazy. It is imperative that we dialogue.

We do need better mental health. It will cost us, but not paying attention to mental health needs is already costing us.

I also know this: As a pastor for 30 years, I can tell you that good people sometimes do monstrous things. It’s too simple to assume we can just find the bad guys. So maybe we need to pay attention to just how easy we want to make it for anyone and everyone to walk around with weapons. Maybe our definition of freedom needs to mature. The government no longer requires those serving in a militia to bring their own rifle, so maybe we need to reexamine exactly what it is about the right to bear arms that makes us free.

But let’s at least insist that our leaders stop calling each other crazy. Let’s listen to one an-

other; we owe that to each other. If we don't, we are just going to keep wrapping ourselves in the limited righteousness of our own perspective, while on average, every day, another mass shooting happens in this country.

I think of my friend Michael. He said, "Ben, were you afraid?" "No, I knew you'd come."

I want to learn to wait like that. I am weary of the fear and the grief.

We light the candle of peace. It's what our faith teaches us to do.

I wonder if Gabriel shows up sometimes, and there is no one in the temple saying prayers.

So while we wait, like Zechariah, let's do what our faith teaches us. Let's pray. Let's study our ancient texts. And for God's sake, let's listen to one another. In situations shaped by fundamentalism, listening to one another is the language of prayer. And it's also a way to do that hard thing: to wait well.

¹Google "Samar Shalaby" and a video of this encounter is available.

²isna.net (home page)

³Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God* (2000), p. 11

⁴Ibid., pp. 8–9

⁵Christine Jamieson, American Psychology Association, "Gun Violence Research: History of the Federal Funding Freeze." Rep. Jay Dickey (R-Ark) proposed the legislation that brought about this change.

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The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's Web site: www.villagepres.org/sermons.