

"Let me tell you something, my friend. Hope is a dangerous thing. Hope can drive a man insane." Red Redding, played by Morgan Freeman, speaks these words of advice in the movie, "The Shawshank Redemption." Tim Robbins plays Andy Dufresne, a man who is wrongly convicted of the murder of his wife and her lover, and sentenced to two consecutive life sentences in prison. Red's comment about hope was an attempt to help Andy adjust to his new reality, to help him let go of the seemingly futile idea that he would ever get out of prison.

When Zechariah entered the temple that day, it is safe to assume that his hope of having children was effectively dead. The text tells us that both he and his wife Elizabeth were "getting on in years" and that Elizabeth was unable to conceive. In first century Jewish culture it was common to believe that the inability to have children was a disgrace, a tragedy, something to be ashamed of, and at worst, a punishment from God. Just to make sure there is no confusion, this is not a belief that I, or most mainline pastors ascribe to. I don't believe God works that way. But that's a sermon for another day. When Zechariah entered the temple that day, I am sure the last thing he expected was to receive a message of hope and promise from God through an angel.

Zechariah is understandably scared. Even if he had been hoping to see an angel, the actual experience of encountering a divine messenger would certainly be intimidating. But the angel speaks the same assuring words to Zechariah that so many angels speak to those they encounter: "Do not be afraid." These four simple words seems to ease Zechariah's fears since once the angel is done telling him that his wife will become pregnant and give birth to a great prophet, Zechariah is no longer silenced by fear, but instead responds with skepticism. "I am an old man... How will I know that this is so?" he asks.

When I read this part of the story again this week, I couldn't help but laugh. How will he know? Doesn't he see the angel standing right in front of him? An angel whose presence was so intimidating that he was initially trembling with fear? Were angels notorious for lying in those days? The angel answers with much the same sentiment "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God and I have been sent to speak to you and bring you good news." I wonder if Gabriel was thinking to himself "Are you serious man? Don't you see me standing here? I'm an angel for crying out loud!" If Zechariah

remained skeptical of God's work in his and Elizabeth's lives after being personally visited by an angel, it is understandable that we too have moments of skepticism, or cynicism.

Some preachers have preached that Zechariah is then punished for not having faith in the angel's words and that is the reason the angel makes him unable to speak until baby John's birth. But I don't think punishment is the motivation for the angel's action. Zechariah's skepticism, fear, and pessimism were getting in the way of his ability to truly hear the message of hope that the angel was bringing him. His skepticism was justified. Not only would Elizabeth give birth in her old age, but John would become a prophet who would go on to proclaim the coming of Jesus as the messiah, who would baptize Jesus in the Jordan river - a prophet who was so influential, the king eventually executes. I wonder if the angel saw the potential for his fear and cynicism to overwhelm him and decided that Zechariah needed to just stop talking for a while, so he could be more receptive to God's voice.

I think that is true for us as well. We are living in a time when people in power are telling us we have good reason to be afraid. Sometimes they flat out act in ways that tell us we have good reason to be afraid. We watch as our tensions increase between our country and other nations. We hear rhetoric that says terrorists are everywhere and all Muslims to incite fear in our hearts. We watch as thousands of people die from gun violence while our leaders will not even entertain a discussion on solutions. Just this weekend we witnessed the passage of a bill in the senate that promises to do great harm to the financial welfare of middle class and the working poor. We have good reason to not be hopeful. I didn't even mention climate change!

Hope in a specific outcome can be dangerous. When we have a very specific hope in our minds, we can set ourselves up for disappointment and miss out on the beauty or joy that might have shown up in its place. For example, and this is a pretty silly example, when I hope that there is a parking spot right up front by the store entrance, I will be disappointed if the only spot is far away. If I wallow in my disappointment, I will potentially miss the opportunity to enjoy the gifts of the longer trek to the store – the fresh air, the singing of the birds, the benefits of exercise.

But we can choose to either listen to the Red Reddings of the world and believe that hope is a dangerous thing, or we can listen to the Andy Dufresne's of the world. In response to Red's comment that hope is a dangerous thing, Andy responds by saying "hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies." Maybe we need to make mute our pessimism, our cynicism, and our skepticism, and instead actively look and listen for messages of God's hope.

Advent is a season of waiting. We are waiting for the birth of Jesus as we do every year. We are waiting patiently but expectantly for the change that will come about as a result of his life and ministry. We are waiting for the time when God's will of peace and love, grace, and joy, replaces the messages of greed, violence, and oppression. But friends, the waiting we are called to do is not a passive waiting, but an active waiting. We are called to participate in bringing hope alive. When we wait for circumstances outside of ourselves to change in order to feel hope, peace, joy or love or to live our lives fully, we rob ourselves of the chance to have those things right now. We have the ability and the power to choose hope in the face of fear. To remember the words of the angels – Do not be afraid.

Red was partially right when he said the hope is a dangerous thing. But it is not dangerous to those who have hope; it is dangerous to the status quo, it is dangerous to the forces of exploitation, it is dangerous to our feelings of fear, doubt, and pessimism. Hope is dangerous because it gives us the strength to keep persisting and the power to create change. This is the message the angels deliver to Zechariah, to Mary, to Joseph, to the shepherds, to the magi. The angels say, "God is doing something amazing and you are part of it."

So, as we wait for Emmanuel to be born once again, may we encounter the world with expectant hope. May we pay attention to the messages of hope that might come from the angels among us: from friends, from family, from the cashier at the grocery store, from the neighbor next door. May we be angels to others - bearing the message "Do not be afraid, have hope." Hope is a powerful and dangerous thing and it is exactly what is needed right now.