

Zechariah and Elizabeth were "righteous before God"

They were getting on in years, but had no children

When in the temple an angel appeared to Zechariah

The angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah...

Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son..." Luke 1:13 NRSV

Elizabeth conceived and bore a son, John

Mary was a virgin engaged to Joseph when an angel appeared to her

The angel called her favored and said the Lord was with her

The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary...

You will conceive... and bear a son..." Luke 1:30-31 NRSV

Mary accepted the responsibility given her by the angel and gave birth to a son, Jesus

Joseph was not yet married when he found out Mary was pregnant with a child

He planned to dismiss her when he had a dream

An angel of the Lord... said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid

to take Mary as your wife... She will bear a son..." Matthew 1:20 NRSV

Joseph followed the angel's bidding, taking Mary as his wife

He named her son, Jesus

Shepherds were in the fields with their sheep when an angel came to them

They were terrified

The angel said to them, "Do not be afraid...

To you is born... a Savior, who is the Messiah..." Luke 2:10-11 NRSV

They went to Bethlehem to see the baby Jesus in a manger

In the Christmas story as recorded in Scripture—four times an angel says, "**Do not be afraid**"

Four times an angel comes to a person with a particular message—calling each to follow

Four times the angel responds with the same words to not be afraid

Four times it was as the angel said it would be

The world events of 2015 have sparked fear within Americans—we hear it in the rhetoric of politicians

People react in fear by wanting to keep the immigrants out of our country

People react in fear of those who are not "like me"

People react in fear because the world is changing and feels out of control

The human reaction is to hunker down, beef up security, control the world

But what is God saying? How do we live as followers of Jesus in 2015?

First—what kind of people does God come to?

Scripture tells us Zechariah, Elizabeth and Joseph were righteous; Mary was favored by God

It appears that God comes to the righteous

But the fourth story tells us that the angel went to the shepherds

Shepherding was a major occupation of Palestine, but...

They were a despised class of people and were considered untrustworthy

Their work made them ceremonially unclean

Their honesty and integrity was questioned to such a degree

that shepherds were not even allowed to testify in a court of law

No statement is made about the personal integrity of these shepherds

I think the qualifying factor here is not righteousness or goodness, perfection, innocence, etc.
The truth is that God comes to everyone
The significant piece is whether or not we are listening
God comes, but we may be deaf to the message, ignoring or turning from what we hear

But for those who hear, God is speaking
Jesus said, *"Let anyone with ears to hear, listen!"* (Mark 4:9, 23; Luke 8:8; 14:35)
Let's listen and hear what God is saying
You likely won't hear in audible words—but you can know the message

For those who hear, the next words speak directly to our fear
In every case the words "do not be afraid" came before the message
The angel recognized the fear present in all of these cases
Without condemnation or lecture, there is a gentle, "do not be afraid"
We are immediately given reassurance that God is with us
I think for me the greatest reassurance is knowing that God is present
Recognizing God's imminence is reassuring
While we are looking at the Christmas story—this message is much broader than this
In the NRSV Bible—59 times God or God's representative said, *"Do not be afraid"*
15 times in the 4 Gospels—11 of them apart from the Christmas story

Then the angel tells the person why he came

- your old wife Elizabeth is going to have a baby
- you will become pregnant by the Holy Spirit and give birth to the Son of God
- take Mary as your wife for the child was conceived by the Holy Spirit
- go and see the baby, the Messiah in a manger

In every case, unusual and astounding news that was pretty scary to the hearer
A message from God about a miracle that is taking place
All of these messages are life changing

Interesting that the one that doesn't believe is the priest in the temple—the professional God man
The one whose job it was to go into sanctuary of the Lord and pray
When the angel appeared, Zechariah couldn't believe what he heard
In this case, he isn't given a choice to refuse the message
Rather, Zechariah loses his voice—an additional sign that God has spoken
God can be persistent
We assume it is the righteous who will say yes and are ready for whatever God brings
But all of us—even the righteous—are human
And those of us steeped in the ways of God are also often limited by our expectations
We assume God will "follow the rules"

The other three accepted the message as from God and accepted their place in the message
The words to Mary speak of how this is possible for anyone
*"The Holy Spirit will come upon you,
and the power of the Most High will overshadow you..."* Luke 1:35 NRSV
It is not in our own strength, but in the strength and power of God that we are called
Whatever we are called to do—it is the power of God that overshadow us, making it possible
God's strength is made perfect in our weakness

We only are asked to be faithful and willing—God does the rest

In the end Zechariah knew the truth of God's presence as well and declared...

*"By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us,
To give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace." Luke 1:78-79 NRSV*

What message is God saying to us today? In what arenas does God say to us, "Do not be afraid"?

In order to hear the "still small voice" of God, we have to lay down our protective stance

To give up the attitude that guaranteed safety is both my right and my demand

We Listen with compassion and invite God to Lead us

We take our fears to God and ask for God's help in letting them go

We stay in Listening mode—both individually and as a community of faith

Since as followers of Jesus, we know this to be the crucial element in our way forward

As we Listen, we remember...

There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear... 1 John 4:18 NRSV

Perfect love was born in the baby Jesus and laid in a manger for all to see

The angels words to the shepherds: *"good news of great joy for all the people" Luke 2:10 NRSV*

It means that fear's grip on human hearts must give way to the greater power of love

We remember Herod's fear and the tragedy it caused in his effort to kill the "threat"—

...Herod... killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under... Matthew 2:16 NRSV

We remember that Mary and Joseph took Jesus to Egypt—refugees from Herod's fear

We remember Jesus' call to compassion for the outcast, marginalized persons

Stories of the leper, woman at the well, woman caught in adultery, eating with sinners...

We remember the parable of the Good Samaritan... or is it our parable of the Good Muslim...?

We remember the words of Jesus: *for I was hungry and you gave me food,*

I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Matthew 25:35-36 NRSV

We remember that Jesus said we are not his only sheep...

I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. John 10:16 NRSV

We remember that Jesus came at a time of great change and spoke of love and grace

Truth is that our world is changing and God will walk with us into the change

Rather than take us out of it and back to the familiar old ways

Jesus ushers in the New Testament and abolishes the old laws

The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ

John 1:17 NRSV

We remember that God is with us and that the Presence of the Almighty God is enough...

God did not give us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.

2 Timothy 1:7

We remember that God said, **"Do not be afraid."**

As we Listen, what does God say next?

After we receive the message that we are not to be afraid—what does God ask of us?

What message comes as our next steps?

How are we to live in our world today as followers of Jesus?