Isaiah 41:8-10, Luke 1:5-23

“No fear in serving God”

Welcome to our second Sunday in Advent. This season of preparation as we here at First Presbyterian are preparing ourselves for the second coming of Jesus by practicing no fear in our daily living. Each one of us is going to face a fear and drive it away in the name of Jesus, as we practiced this season with each one reach one.

You’ve learned by now, or you will over this season, that to live with no fear demands us to face our fear and at times face ourselves to take action that put us outside of our comfort zone. Our task, our primary service as a church is to present each one here, mature in Christ when he comes back. Paul’s words in Colossians tell us: “So that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me. Mature in Christ, that’s our goal people over Advent.

This past Friday as I was leading the preschool chapel I asked the kids the following question: “Soon we will be celebrating the birthday of somebody special, do you know who it is?” One little boy raised his hand and said: “I’m special”. Yes, you are special, I told him. What was I going to say, I mean someone more special than you?

Each one of us is called to understand how special we are and the love of Christ that makes us special. Someone had gotten through to that kid and he got it. Today in our second Scripture of people dealing with fear we find the father of John the Baptist, or Zechariah and his brush with God and how he is given a task to serve God with no fear. Let’s read.

**READ**

Tony Campolo tells of his experience at a summer camp and the one year he was a counselor. There was a middle school boy with cerebral palsy who was attending. The other kids thought it was a good time to make fun of him. As he lurched his way around the camp some of the boys thought it was a lot of fun to make fun of him and they would line up behind him and mock him. They would ask him a question just to hear him stutter and work hard to get the words out. They thought it was hilarious. It came time for each cabin to nominate someone a speaker for the revival night and to add to their cruelty they chose Billy to speak to the camp. They thought it would make their week. The 7 word sermon he would give would change the life of many in that camp.

As he made his way up to the front, the giggles already started. He looked out and with a determined face slowly and painstakingly said: Jesus loves me and I love Jesus. The place was so quiet except for the middle school boys who were beginning to cry. All the kids gave him a standing ovation. As he goes around the country to this day people stop him and tell him they were saved at that meeting.

Billy without even knowing it had no fear in serving the Lord and his fearlessness, even when faced with what was not a debilitating disease, allowed others to experience the love of Christ.

Zechariah served the Lord on a daily basis. He and his wife were PK’s, both from the priestly class. They lived very godly lives and Zechariah continued in the line of work of his ancestors, as a pastor himself. Twice a year for a week each time he was required to go to Jerusalem with his team and man the temple. Every priest had their time to go throughout the year. Zechariah seemed to have loved his work because he loved God and what better way to make a living than to serve full time the person you love the most.

When it came time to divvy up the responsibilities Zechariah happened to be assigned the task that would take him closest to the Holy of Holies. He had to change out the incense behind the partition which was right before the Holy of Holies, where no one entered but the high priest and that was only once a year.

He went about doing his work, finished up and then decided to pray by himself before he went back out to give the people of Israel a final blessing. The blessing that we find in Number 6:24-26 which goes like this: The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine upon you, and be gracious to you, the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. But that came at the end, once he came out to meet the people who were now in prayer.

In his prayers with no one there he prayed for the redemption of Israel, that like the prophet Isaiah stated in chapter 41. He prayed that the people of Israel would be able to see that God had not cast them off but rather chosen them. He prayed that the people of Israel would find confidence in God’s presence and not fear.

He then prayed as he had every day of his marriage, which was well past the 50 year mark now, that God would bless him with children. It was a bit of a tired prayer since it had been prayed for so long with no avail, but so was the deliverance for Israel been a long drawn out prayer, for eons it seemed and still it had not been answered.

He finished and opened his eyes to go out and give that blessing from Numbers, when in front of him stood an angel of the Lord. Zechariah felt fear like a blanket fall upon him, descend upon him so that he was being suffocated. Did you see that video from Brazil which is a prank or a joke on people who get in an elevator, then they turn out the lights, a little child in a white gown, all disheveled and looking very much like a ghost and holding a little baby climbs into the elevator while it is pitch black, the lights go on and the people in the elevator see this apparition who is real among them and they are absolutely terrified. It went viral, but I thought, I would probably have a heart attack.

We have been faced with frightening realities in our lives, but normally not in this way where an angel of the Lord appears before us and speaks to us. The angel who later identifies himself as Gabriel, which means God’s hero or warrior, tells Zechariah: do not fear. No fear. Look at the words in vs. 13: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah.” Fear in Greek is phobos, and it means a certain emotion or sense of impending disaster or calamity. We get our word phobia from that. But Zechariah means God remembered. Don’t be afraid, for God has remembered. Your prayer has been heard both of them at once actually, for your son and for Israel. Israel will be redeemed and you will have a son. The two are actually somewhat related to each other. His name will be John which means God has shown favor.

The angel goes on to tell this father to be that his son will be great and a whole list of incredible things that he will bring about. Look at it: He will turn many to the Lord, turn parents to their children, the disobedient to wisdom, and make people ready for the coming of the Lord. Sounds like getting ready for Advent. This is why John the Baptist is the main figure for Advent, he prepares the way for the coming of the Lord. The angel tells Zechariah that his son will serve the Lord in all these different ways, and he does.

Now, we all think that our kids are pretty spectacular, and we all know that they are destined for great things. But I’ve never had an angel confirm it in words. I’ve never had an angel come and tell me how great my kids really are, I guess we’ve known it all along. Zechariah finds his voice and like others before him who are confronted by an angel of God and terrified by this confrontation, he asks a simple question: How in the world is this going to happen? I’m old and my wife is past her prime.

Abraham, Moses, and later on Mary all ask that same question of God of how is he going to make this miraculous happen. Zechariah has the added impossibility of Elizabeth who is barren, but fits the textbook case for barren women blessed by the Lord with children. You remember Sarah who was also pretty advanced in years, Rebekkah, Rachel, Samson’s mom, Hannah. God intervenes in all their lives to produce children. God does it.

But I don’t blame Zechariah for asking how he was supposed to serve God in this capacity as a father. So much was against him. He basically asks for a sign since Gideon asked for and got a soggy fleece, Hezekiah asked for an eclipse and got it, Ahaz didn’t ask for anything but got the sign of a pregnant virgin. Zechariah needed a sign, some confirmation before he was able to step forward and serve. The angel gave him muteness, he could not speak until after John was born and dedicated in the temple.

Zechariah was overcome with fear when he faced the Lord. That fear was based upon his understanding of how the world was supposed to work and the way that it worked was clearly not in a way that God would send an angel to answer your prayers, right? There are so many signs of God’s presence here at FPC. We often miss them because we are busy with making sure the details of the season are met.

Did you know that in the 2nd mile offering that we took up a few weeks ago this church collected over a span of two weeks, I said two weeks not two months, $9,949 for the Sandy relief effort, that was until someone yesterday donated $51 to make it a clean $10,000, to help our brothers and sisters in need. That’s a sign to me of a church that has no fear in serving the Lord. It is absolutely amazing.

Today at our congregational meeting we will be electing elders, deacons, and trustees who will be serving the church in a recognized leadership role. We just received new members who are chomping at the bit to serve and get involved, or already are. God has called you in this time and place to this church for a very specific reason. We need to discover what that is together. You are called to serve, no matter who you are. If you are here today, you are called to serve. Look for a sign that God might be giving to you to serve in a specific way around here.

The fear that I want you to face this Sunday and this week and this Advent season, is whatever fear you may be struggling with in serving the Lord. Do you struggle in donating your time so that His kingdom can be realized in either the glamorous jobs, or the behind the scenes jobs. Do you struggle with serving by not tithing because you are fearful in this economy that things just may not go the way you plan. Do you have fear in serving because you don’t know where you fit in and you are embarrassed to ask. Don’t ask, just get to work. Jump in feet first and watch people come around you to join you.

Remember, our goal is to present everyone mature in Christ. A sign of maturity, of Christian maturity is serving the Almighty. Have no fear as you do it.