

# Do Not Be Afraid

Luke 1:5-25

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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We spent most of the fall in Mark's gospel. For Advent, we're going to be hanging out with Luke.

The season of Advent is about preparing for the **comings** of Jesus. We think naturally of his first coming at this time of year, but Advent is also about kindling our hope for when Jesus will come again in glory.

This year, we're going to prepare ourselves for Jesus comings by making our way through the first chapter of Luke, the verses leading up to the first coming of Jesus to a manger in Bethlehem.

We're going to do so anchoring each service in one of the four traditional themes of Advent—Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love.

This Sunday, we're focusing on hope.

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I want to start a long way from Bethlehem. I want to start at a Catholic chapel in Lucerne, Switzerland.

This past August, for two months, this chapel hosted an art display called “Deus in Machina” (God in the Machine).

The display was essentially an avatar of Jesus on a computer screen—tucked into a confessional—that took questions by visitors.

There was a little sign that invited visitors to enter a confessional. Below a lattice screen across which penitent believers would ordinarily speak with a real live priest, there was a

little green light indicating when you could speak. When the red light came on, you had to be quiet because “AI Jesus” on a computer screen on the other side was responding.

The idea, said the chapel’s theological assistant,

was to recognize the growing importance of artificial intelligence in human lives, even when it comes to religion, and explore the limits of human trust in a machine.<sup>1</sup>

I’m not sure what your first reaction to AI Jesus is. I’ll confess that mine was (and remains) almost entirely negative. Reducing the voice of God to computer code and seems reductive at best, sacrilegious at worst.

Philipp Haslbauer, an IT specialist at the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts, seemed attuned to people’s concerns.

Seeking to assuage people’s doubts, he asked “AI Jesus” about its message for a troubled world, and about whether AI could be helpful as a way for people to find God.

“All knowledge and wisdom ultimately come from God,” the chatbot said in a soothing voice, after a pause to respond, and the image briefly crackled. “If used wisely, AI can indeed be a tool to explore the wonders of creation, deepen our understanding of Scripture, and foster connections among people.”

“Yet it remains essential to seek God with all your heart and soul beyond any technology,” it added.

Well, what a relief. I’m sure real Jesus would approve.

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Why do I bring up AI Jesus on the First Sunday of Advent, 2024?

I was struck mostly by the nature of the questions asked of “God in the Machine.” They were, as you might imagine, the same questions that many have asked the actual God from time immemorial.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ctvnews.ca/sci-tech/ai-jesus-avatar-tests-man-s-faith-in-machines-and-the-divine-1.7126420>

According to the article,

Visitors broached many topics, including true love, the afterlife, feelings of solitude, war and suffering in the world, the existence of God.

It struck me that behind each of these very old questions lurks another very old human reality.

Fear.

We are afraid of not being loved, of not finding love, of running out of love.

We are afraid what we do not know, of what we cannot see, of what lies beyond death.

We are afraid of being alone.

We are afraid of a world that seems chaotic and violent, where so many suffer such injustice. We are afraid of suffering ourselves.

And we may even be afraid of God. That God might turn out to not be as we imagine. That God may not even exist. That the story of our lives, the story of our world, will in the end come to nothing.

The article didn't say how AI Jesus responded to these questions. I would imagine AI just scanned real Jesus' sayings from the New Testament, Christian theology and worship, perhaps even sermon or two down through the ages, and came up with something resembling a passable Jesus-sounding response to each of the queries that he encountered.

But I wonder if AI Jesus could have been spared some computational time and energy and simply said four words from our text this morning:

*Do not be afraid.*

I did a search this week on this four-word phrase. Anyone want to guess how many times it shows up in the bible?

Eighty-one times!

(At least in English. In the NIV translation)

Apparently, this is something that human beings need to be told again and again and again.

Fear is a natural response in a world where fearful things happen.

Fear is also, as any decent marketer knows, extremely profitable. Fear drives engagement.

This is not exactly new—there have always been greedy people eager to profit on the fears of others. But like so many other things, the digital age seems to send this dynamic into hyperdrive.

We live and move in a media ecosystem that is *heavily* incentivized toward catastrophizing, sensationalizing, and generally ratcheting up fear, anger, resentment, division.

These are profitable emotions. People who are afraid and angry and anxious scroll and watch and click and consume media (and advertising!) endlessly.

Fear is natural. And fear sells. But fear is not what God wants for us.

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I said we'd be making our way through the first chapter of Luke this Advent. You may have noticed that I didn't start at verse 1.

The story of how the birth of John the Baptist came about is where the narrative begins. But the book begins with Luke addressing a certain Theophilus.

Nobody knows who this actually was. Perhaps he was some local official or literary patron. It may just be a literary device, a stand-in for "anyone who has heard anything about Christianity." The word "Theophilus" means "lover of God" in Greek).

At any rate, Luke wants to give an orderly account. He wants to tell the story about "the events that have been fulfilled among us" through Jesus of Nazareth.

So where to begin? Well, Luke doesn't begin with a bit of poetic theology like John. Not with a genealogy, like Matthew. Not with John the Baptist ranting and raving in the wilderness like Mark.

Luke begins with a childless old couple growing short on hope, that have perhaps even given up on hope.

Zecharia is a priest, doing his priestly duties. He is burning incense in the temple when the angel Gabriel appears and for the 69<sup>th</sup> time thus far in the biblical narrative says the four familiar words.

“But the angel said to him, ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard.’” (Luke 1:13).

The child Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth have been longing for, praying for will, impossibly be coming.

Their son—John—will be the one who paves the way for Jesus, who brings many of the people of Israel back to the Lord. John will be the one who prepares the way, who makes ready.

Zechariah’s response is understandable. How is any of this possible. We’re old. This isn’t how things work.

But while the response is understandable, it is also unacceptable. For his refusal to believe this impossible good news, Zechariah is rendered speechless. Literally. He is rendered mute until his impossible child is born.

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On this first Sunday of Advent, 2024, I am thinking about hope and about those four words that are so often what heaven has to say to earth:

*Do not be afraid.*

Was Zechariah’s refusal to believe simply an expression of biological impossibility? Or was it also an expression of fear? Fear of the unknown? Fear of further disappointment? Fear of what it all might mean? Fear of how things would have to change?

I think there is a deep connection between our hopes and our fears.

*The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.* The writer of the famous Christmas carol seems to know this. Our fears are oriented to what we hope for and our hopes feed back into that which makes us afraid.

It seems to me that at least on some level fear is a refusal to hope. It is a resignation that how things *have been* is how things *will be*.

It is to close the door on newness, on possibility, on the God who interrupts history in wild and beautiful and unpredictable ways.

On this First Sunday of Advent, can I simply encourage you to take the temperature of your hopes and your fears.

What are you afraid of?

Maybe it's the doom cycle of the media you consume. Maybe it's the "state of the world" where everything seems to be fraying and on the verge of falling apart, where nothing seems sacred and everything seems to be for sale.

Maybe it's an illness or a failing relationship. Maybe it's financial worries. Maybe it's an addiction that won't let go. Maybe it's worry over someone you love who is wandering down dark and hopeless trails. Maybe it's death.

There are so many things that can make us afraid; so many things that can make hope hard.

I am not here to tell you that your fears are illusory or that ratcheting up your hope will lead to a miraculous change in your circumstances.

For every Zechariah and Elizabeth there are countless childless couples who do not get their miracle. Pain and sorrow remain part of our experience this side of eternity.

**What I am here to tell you is that because of what the God who interrupts history *has* done, *is* doing, and *will* do, hope will *always* be and *ultimately* be a better bet than fear.**

On Friday, I was driving to an appointment and listening to a sermon on the raising of Lazarus by an Episcopalian priest named David Zahl. It had thus far been an unremarkable sermon. I wasn't paying very careful attention.

But every once in a while, you hear a word or a phrase that just grabs your attention.

Again, the context is the story of Lazarus, but I think we could apply them to the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, to the story of our world where so many things often seem hopeless, and to our own individual stories where we often struggle with hope:

“Jesus enters into a situation with zero hope. There's not a shred.

This man has been dead for four days [the couple had been childless for many decades]... If you... have passed the point of hopelessness, well God has not abandoned you. **Jesus' power lasts beyond the expiration date of our hope and even our life.”<sup>2</sup>**

God's power lasts beyond the expiration date of our hope.

The hope of Advent is that God comes to God's people and does something new. Not on our schedule. Not in ways that we would ever expect or predict.

But God comes. And he meets our hopes and our fears not in a machine, but in the person of Jesus Christ.

So, do not be afraid. Christ has come. Christ comes to us now and meets us in our hope-starved world. And Christ will come again to make all things new.

Amen.



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<sup>2</sup> From The Mockingpulpit: The Measure of Love - David Zahl, Nov 5, 2024  
<https://podcasts.apple.com/ca/podcast/the-mockingpulpit/id682011512?i=1000675820585&r=722>