

## *Amid Our Fear, We Are Heard*

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This Advent, the four-week season of waiting and preparation for the arrival of a Messiah born into the world, we will spend some time focusing on fear, what it is that we fear, and of course, what God gives us as a tonic or retardant to our fear.

Maybe the most important thing we can do, when faced with fear, is to name our fears—to be vulnerable enough to admit them and not be embarrassed or ashamed of them.

The fear that we aren't good enough in the eyes of the world around us, the fear of being alone, the fear that the world is spinning out of control and descending into greater chaos, the fear for our safety and security as well as that of those we love both in the short term and long term—these fears dominate at times.

And yet, it was into such a world as this that God sent a new-born child thousands of years ago to bring light and new life. As the famous Christmas carol puts it: "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."

This is the world in which God is present and chooses to be present—a fearful one—then and now. And God brings hope into it.

And so, with courage we can confess our fears.

Writer Michelle Cottle wrote recently about a big fear of hers that was manifested in a personal family crisis she and her sister endured.

It's a crisis familiar to thousands of families in this country. Here's how she described hers:

*"The first sign of trouble arrived by text. On Dec. 17 at 2:33 p.m., my younger sister, Melissa, pinged me from Houston to say that our 78-year-old father had veered off course while driving himself to a medical appointment.*

*"He has missed his exit," she wrote. "I don't want to call him and tell him because he will be pissed that I am tracking him. What do we do?"*

*"Honestly just let him run," I wrote back from my home in Washington.*

*This was not the first time Dad had gone rogue while driving. Just the day before, he had cruised in aimless circles around unfamiliar neighborhoods for over an hour, dismissing worried calls from our mother. But this time he was missing lab appointments related to his bladder cancer.*

*The family knew that Dad was chafing under the restrictions that went with his chemotherapy. No crowds! No gardening! No letting the dog lick his face! But we also knew the drugs could cause cognitive issues. Dad's oncologist had warned us to be on alert for odd behavior. Like an overprotective mom, my sister had started tracking his phone, mostly without his knowledge. My father got crabby when he thought anyone was treating him "like an invalid."*

*The hospital called our mother to ask why my father hadn't shown up, alerting her to the situation. Mom called Dad, who claimed to be stuck in traffic — true only if "stuck in traffic" meant driving in circles.*

*Dad eventually drifted home — after burning up 49 miles over the course of nearly two hours and missing two appointments. He tried to shrug off the whole episode, but something was clearly off. Mel and I agreed that I should at least talk with him about hitting the pause button on driving. (Spoiler: That did not go well.)*

*You can see where this is going. Faster than you can say “chemo brain,” my family’s caregiving experience spiraled into a chaotic spectacle that was part harrowing medical drama, part sitcom. Even early on, there were 2 a.m. phone calls, mangled medical equipment, emergency room visits, dizzying medication schedules and epic clashes over how much meddling Dad would stomach from his two daughters. “You are your mother’s child,” he groused whenever he felt I was being bossy. (Which, to be fair, I often was.) Our chat about him relinquishing the car keys featured an impressive amount of profanity on both sides. It was, I think, the only time I ever raised my voice to my father.*

*And all that was before my mother fell and shattered her leg during one of Dad’s hospital stays. This landed her at a different hospital across town. Awaiting surgery. As a freak snowstorm was bearing down on Houston.*

*As the doctors explained it, my father likely had been masking symptoms of Alzheimer’s for years. When the cancer and chemo and attendant infections overloaded his system, the dementia was unmasksed — and progressed with breathtaking speed.*

*A few weeks later, an infection prompted us to start him in hospice care. By then, he had come unmoored in time and would tell visitors he was playing poker with his brothers, both deceased.*

*The last person he consistently recognized before he died was my mother. Mom has insisted on continuing to live in their apartment by herself, with frequent check-ins from Mel and liberal use of grocery delivery services. (Michelle Cottle, *New York Times*, November 24, 2025)*

That story told of Michelle Cottle’s experience—the fear she and her sister had every day as they cared for their aging parents. The fear of when the next phone call would be—from their mom or dad when there had been a fall, the fear of finding caregivers

who would treat their parents with the dignity and tenderness they needed and the expense that came with hiring said caregivers, and the fear of the unknown toll it would take on both of them.

In her writing, though (where she advocated against cuts to Medicaid, which only heighten the stress of caring for aging parents), Cottle also expressed a willingness to be heard by her readers. In her writing, she was willing to be vulnerable with deeply personal matters. She was willing to have those fears heard, which all of us need license to do.

In our texts for this morning, the author of Lamentations cries out in personal pain while his homeland is under Babylonian rule ("I called on your name, O Lord, from the depths of the pit."). And in Luke, as an elderly priest, Zechariah had witnessed the fall of Judean independence and the beginning of Roman occupation. He longed for the coming Messiah, and he longed for a son.

Both had the courage to express their longings; both longed to have their voices heard.

And God's response begins with a recognition to both: your prayer has been heard.

Sure, we'd all prefer the miracle of healing amid our struggle, the miracle of having a child (like Zechariah and Elizabeth were granted). But in the midst of expressing their fear (Zechariah was startled and gripped by fear when the angel appeared), they could take comfort that their prayers were heard.

When we express our fears—or anything else to God—God listens.

And God listens through the people God sends as God's agents of compassion and hope.

If you're fortunate to have somebody who listens to you when your heart is broken, or your mind is failing, or when you're not sure what to do, or when you're scared, you should value that person—highly.

And I'm not talking about people who feign listening, the ones who pretend to hear you but always interrupt your story with their own. No, I'm talking about true listeners, people who say next to nothing while you share your story, the ones who know that what you need is to truly be heard. And they don't necessarily give you advice—although a little wisdom or encouragement from them at the end will inspire you. They are truly hearing your story, and in doing so, giving you permission to share your hopes and your fears.

Through them, God is saying, "Do not fear; do not be afraid." And that's hopeful.

At Thanksgiving gatherings and when families get together for Christmas, it's not unusual for conversations to be filled with anything but good listening. In fact, more and more relationships between family members contain estrangement.

Recent research has shown that at least one in four adults is estranged from a close relative, and these rifts occur across all demographic groups: race, class, and religions.

We're holding grudges more than we ever have and seem content on continuing or growing our divides. More and more, we're letting our closest relationships disintegrate through neglect, busyness and an unwillingness to move past the things that bother us.

Research on end-of-life regrets reveals a consistent pattern. People don't regret missing out on a promotion or failing to buy a bigger house. They regret not asking for forgiveness. They regret

not expressing their love more often. They regret holding a grudge. And they regret letting relationships with their families and friends fall apart.

We all need to do a better job of learning how to accept people as they are, sometimes in spite of who they are. And instead of trying to fix somebody, listening to them and allowing them to share—including their fears.

So, maybe all of us can hold our tongues more when we're together. Or try this thought experiment: Imagine if you had a year left to live. Would you want to spend your last Christmas resenting your father's politics? Or avoiding your sister for something she said last Christmas? Or would you rather find the grace to focus on the positives? Perhaps your father, for all his social-media-fueled hot takes, has mastered the art of carving a turkey. Your sister might be judgmental but you love her holiday decorating. Accepting what you can't change doesn't mean you're endorsing their beliefs — it simply means doing everything you can, right now, to embrace the positives and look past the negatives.

It's turning to someone who doesn't want to correct you but instead simply wants to listen to your fears. And if we all did that better, maybe our strained relationships could be better restored.

We all want to be heard, and when we take the time to truly hear others' stories, we build bridges. And in doing so, God brings hope out of fear.

The writer of Lamentations shared his fear. So did Zechariah. They were vulnerable enough to share what was on their hearts. God heard them, and God hears us, through our prayers and the people who truly listen. Be courageous to share

and be a listener to another, so that he or she also knows their fears are heard.

And if that happens, there will be hope.