

I come in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It was a time when life was difficult. Civil and religious leaders were considered untrustworthy. They manipulated, exploited, and even had others murdered in order to ensure a long, powerful, and privileged career.

It was a time when a person's dignity was based on social biases and stereotypes associated with ethnicity, sex, religion, culture, and status. These attributes determined access to services, housing, educational opportunities, employment opportunities, and social privileges. Those who did not measure up were cast to the margins, rejected, pushed into poverty, forced into ghettos, exiled, or murdered because of who they were.

It was a time when road systems were designed to make it virtually impossible for marginalized groups to travel into privileged neighborhoods. Sometimes neighborhoods were demolished and families scattered, all for the sake of 'development' such as trade routes, or expansion of housing for the elite.

It was a time when unfamiliar diseases took its toll on the population. Persistent pathogens often made treatment evasive. Medical treatment would likely have been more available to the elite, but not necessarily more effective.

It was a time when violence was rampant. Ethnic groups against ethnic groups. Social classes against social classes. Families against families.

Spouses against spouses. Children against children. There was always a question whether the other person ill-intentioned? Peace-keepers were not always just or equitable. Social biases, and stereotyping sometimes influenced the manner and severity of law enforcement. Some took law into their own hands.

It was a time when people lived in fear. Fear, that which initiates primordial biological responses when one feels threatened. An article from The University of West Alabama states, “What happens physically is largely automatic and can leave us feeling drained because our physiological response to fear can be intense.” Our heart rate increases, and blood vessels constrict. Respiratory rate increases, and adrenaline picks up. If fear is intense, the body is pushed into fight or flight mode. Fear can even cause a metabolic response that can increase the risk of heart or kidney disease, vision problems, and more. Living in fear can affect your long-term health, both physically and emotionally.

A paper published by The Department of Psychology at the University of Regina, Canada, argues that “Fear of the Unknown” is a hard-wired fear, and plays a significant role in many, if not most, emotional disorders. Fear of the unknown is the inability to obtain enough reliable information to make decisions. Studies show that humans usually assume a situation is a threat, and then evaluate further.

Meanwhile, biological reactions are taking place. Our bodies and emotions are in overdrive. And prolonged fear, especially fear of the unknown, can wear us down, confuse us, and depress us. So why the biology/psychology lesson?

As I was saying, it was a time when people lived in fear. Fear of other ethnic groups, social classes, or nations. Fear of those who govern. Fear of job and financial security. Fear of natural forces, such as hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, etc. Fear of untreatable diseases. Fear of being personally assaulted or killed. Fear that loved ones may be snatched up by malicious individuals. Fear of law enforcement brutality. Fear of scientific endeavors. Each of these fears is filled with uncertainty. One's life could be impacted at any time, without notice. Is it any wonder that whole societies become dysfunctional when they live in fear?

The “it was a time when” to which I am referring might be first century Israel – around Jesus' time. It might be in the 11th century when countless people died at the hands of crusaders. Perhaps it was in the 15th century when Europeans were colonizing new territories by force. How about in the 20th century during the Holocaust? **Or how about now?** I contend that fear of the unknown has been with us every day since the beginning of humanity. So, how do we navigate through it?

I say, hope. Hope anchored in faith. The word for hope in Hebrew (**Tikvah**), means expectation—and it also means cord or rope, which comes from a root word that means to bind or to wait for, or wait upon. Hope is meaningless unless it is anchored in faith. **Faith, as defined in Hebrews, is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction in things not seen.** Hope speaks for the future, and faith speaks for the present. So, I can hope to live on Jupiter. But if I don't believe that science will get us there, it is nothing but a silly dream.

The faith to which our hope is anchored is this: That we believe in God's promises, we trust that God will always be with us, and we rely on God's providence to act. In faith, we look ahead in hope when “every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” All will be made right. In faith, we look ahead, in hope, to the return of Jesus, the Christ. In faith, we look ahead in the hope of the Resurrection.

In faith, we allow God to be God, and recognize that we are not. Mr. Menachem Daum, a Holocaust survivor, recalls his father saying, “A God who limits himself to actions that we humans can understand couldn't possibly be God.” In faith, we place every aspect of our lives into God's hands, and trust that He knows what He is doing, even if we don't understand why. Faith and hope draw us closer to God.

Faith and hope push out fear. Don't get me wrong. Fear is always trying to cut in between us and God. But in steadfast faith in God's promises, His faithfulness to us, and His actions, fear is defeated.

In Malachi, we hear a prophesy of hope. Prepare! The Lord of Hosts is coming! In our Gospel, John the Baptist, proclaimed that, as prophesied in Isaiah, God's promises, faithfulness to us, and actions are being fulfilled. Be ready. Like John the Baptist, we can clear the way for the Lord, by anchoring ourselves in faith, and reaching upward in hope, and bringing it into reality now. If we allow God to be God, and allow Him to work through us, fear can be pushed out. We, like John the Baptist, can be messengers of hope – God with us today, and God with us forever.

The fact is that the world is full of uncertainty. Faith does not suddenly give us all of the answers. But it does give us the strength and courage to navigate through uncertainty, difficulty, and even death, knowing God has us!

I cannot conceive of a time that we were without uncertainty and fear. I also cannot conceive of a time in which God was not present, loving, and forgiving, just patiently waiting for us, drowning in our fears of the unknown, to grasp onto the life-saving providence of God. Today, we join Malachi and John the Baptist in earnestly waiting for God to bring us into a life of peace, love, and salvation. But remember, God is also earnestly waiting for us to let Him be God. Amen.