

From Generation to Generation: God Meets Us In Our Fears

Luke 1:26-38

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While church attendance and membership may be in decline, spiritual hunger and interest in the Bible are not. During the pandemic internet searches for bible verses increased by 80%. And the number one search word during the pandemic? Fear! Followed by healing and justice. The most searched for, read and bookmarked verse in 2020 was Isaiah 41:10, "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you." I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

From generation to generation, fear has played a prominent role in the drama of our lives. But God meets us in our fear. Here is what I want to proclaim to you today – because God's Spirit is with us and God's Spirit is for us, our fear can be held in tension with wonder. So, we can do the bold and brave thing for the sake of the world even when we're afraid.

Say that with me -

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That was certainly true for Mary as we'll see in today's scripture reading from Luke 1.

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. Gabriel appeared to her and said, "Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!" Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean. "Don't be afraid, Mary," the angel told her, "For you have found favor with God! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!" Mary asked the angel, "But how can this happen? I am a virgin." The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God. What's more, your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was

barren, but she has conceived a son and is now in her sixth month. For the word of God will never fail." Mary responded, "I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true." And then the angel left her.

This is the word of God for the people of God.

Thanks be to God!

Confused. Disturbed. Perplexed. Deeply troubled. Oh, and let's not forget terrified. That's how Mary was feeling when, out of the blue, an angel appeared to her. Here's an interesting little piece of bible trivia. Every time an angel shows up in Scripture, the angel says, "Do not be afraid." Makes you wonder if maybe angels aren't the chubby little cherubs you see on greeting cards, right? Maybe they're terrifying! But it wasn't just the angel's appearance that confused and disturbed Mary. It was what the angel said. Mary was going to have a baby through the Holy Spirit, and this child would be called "Son of God" and reign as King over Israel.

Can you imagine the thoughts that ran through Mary's mind?

- How will I explain this to my fiancé, Joseph?
- How will I explain this to my parents?
- What will the neighbors say?
- Am I dreaming all this?
- Will the Pharisees stone me to death, thinking I've committed a sin?
- I'm not ready to be a mother, let alone the mother of God's son.

Is it any wonder that Mary was confused?

Disturbed? Perplexed? Deep troubled? And Terrified! And yet, by the time the conversation is over Mary's fear is coupled with wonder. She asks, "How can this be?" And then her wonder moves her to submission to God, "I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true." Mary does the bold and brave thing for the sake of the world. How is that possible? How is it possible that Mary's fear could include wonder and then submission? I can't help but wonder if it wasn't two things the angel said.

First, "the Lord is with you." Mary wouldn't face any of this alone. And second, "you are a favored woman". In other words, God is for you, not against you. God is up to something good, even though her journey with Jesus would break her heart more than a few times. I have no doubt that during her pregnancy Mary experienced lots of moments when fear gripped her, but God met Mary in her fear and

brought her back to wonder and a willingness to say “yes”.

Let me say it again, Because God’s Spirit is with us and God’s Spirit is for us, our fear can be held in tension with wonder. So, we can do the bold and brave thing for the sake of the world even when we’re afraid. And that’s Good News for you and me because there are lots of things that cause us to fear in this world, aren’t there? The economy. The climate crisis. The continuing pandemic. Political divisiveness. Racial and economic injustice. War. And our own personal challenges to name just a few. It’s so easy to allow fear to paralyze us, to narrow our vision and make our lives small. And we can live that way and God will love us no less. But I believe that’s also so much less than what God intends for us.

There are two words in our bibles that are translated as “fear”. One is the Greek word, phobos. It’s where we get our word “phobia” from. It means to be frightened, terrified. Phobos is what Mary felt when the angel first appeared. But there’s another word in Hebrew, yirah, that also gets translated as “fear”, but it really means deep reverence, awe or wonder. That’s what’s meant when Scripture talks about the “fear of the Lord.” It’s not a matter of being frightened of God, but to be in awe of God, to have deep reverence and a sense of wonder in God’s presence. Mary’s story teaches us that when God meets us in our fear, in our phobos, we can also experience yirah, a sense of awe and wonder. Like Mary, we may still feel fear, but our sense of awe and wonder in God’s presence, along with faith that the Spirit is both with us and for us, can move us beyond paralysis. It can open and widen our lives to possibilities. It can give us courage to be bold and brave for the sake of the world.

We see this pattern in the biblical story over and over again. God called Abram and Sarai at the ripe old age of 75 to leave their homeland and go where God would lead them. They must have been terrified, but God said “I will be with you. I will be your God and I will bless you” and so Abram and Sarai said “yes”. God spoke to Moses through a burning bush in the desert, calling him to confront Pharaoh and lead the Israelites out of slavery. Moses must have been terrified, but God said, “I will be with you. I will provide what you need” and so Moses said “yes”. God called Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane to lay down his life to reveal God’s love

for the world. Jesus was terrified enough to sweat blood, but God said, “I will be with you, and I will raise you up” and so Jesus said “yes”.

I think of a young woman with two young children whose husband died far too young. Every morning she wakes, she is terrified to step into the day. She fears that she can’t raise these children on her own, that she can’t make ends meet, that grief will swallow her whole and that she’ll never know joy, happiness and love again. But she reminds herself that in baptism God claimed her as God’s own beloved child and promised that his Holy Spirit would comfort, encourage and strengthen her. And so, she makes the sign of the cross on her forehead and says, “yes”. She plants her feet on the floor and moves into the day.

Friends, I know that for some of you life is hard right now, perhaps even terrifying. And maybe you’re in that place where fear has paralyzed you, narrowed your vision and made your life small. Hear me carefully – even the Gospel may not be enough to take away your fear. But what the Gospel does, and has done from generation to generation, is assure you that God meets you in your fear and promises that God’s Spirit is with you and God’s Spirit is for you. You are loved and never alone. May that Good News birth within you enough awe and wonder to empower you to do the bold and brave thing for the sake of the world, whatever that might be, even though you may still be afraid.

Now, let me lead you in this guided prayer. Close your eyes and bring to mind something that is frightening you, causing you anxiety. Now, imagine that you’re locked in a small, dark room with that fear. Now, imagine a light, like a small candle, entering into that darkness. See and feel its warm glow. Now imagine hearing God’s voice, “I am with you and I am for you. Do not be afraid.” Allow those words to expand within you, filling you with awe and wonder. Listen deeply now...what is God calling you to do now?

We give you thanks, O God, that you are with us and you are for us. Your promised presence opens us to awe and wonder at what you might do in and through us. Like Mary, may we trust that in your mercy and grace you will use us to birth something good into this world, something that reveals your love for all people. Your wonders surround us. Do wonders in and through us. This we pray in the strong name of Christ and together all God’s people said, Amen.