“Even in Our Fear, We Are Called”
December 14, 2025
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Luke 1:26-38 (CEB, adapted)

[26] When Elizabeth was six months pregnant, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a city in Galilee, [27] to a virgin who was engaged to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David’s house. The virgin’s name was Mary. [28] When the angel came to her, he said, “Rejoice, favored one! The Lord is with you!” [29] She was confused by these words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. [30] The angel said, “Don’t be afraid, Mary. God is honoring you. [31] Look! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. [32] He will be great and he will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of David his father. [33] He will rule over Jacob’s house forever, and there will be no end to his kingdom.”
[34] Then Mary said to the angel, “How will this happen since I am a virgin?”
[35] The angel replied, “The Holy Spirit will come over you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the one who is to be born will be holy. He will be called God’s Son. [36] Look, even in her old age, your relative Elizabeth has conceived a son. This woman who was labeled ‘unable to conceive’ is now six months pregnant. [37] Nothing is impossible for God.”
[38] Then Mary said, “I am the Lord’s servant. Let it be with me just as you have said.” Then the angel left her.

There is a pattern in the first couple chapters of Luke: An unsuspecting person, minding their own business, is visited by an angel. The angel terrifies them. The angel tells them not to be afraid, then tells them something that makes them even more afraid than the angel’s appearance was in the first place.

That is, of course, what happened in the scripture lesson we read for today. This is perhaps the most well-known and beloved text of the season of Advent: the annunciation, the angel Gabriel’s announcement to Mary that she would be the mother of Jesus. Much is made of Mary’s humility, courage, and fortitude in her response, and rightly so. But make no mistake: Mary was afraid. And she had good reason to be.

When the angel appeared, he greeted her joyfully. “Rejoice, favored one. The Lord is with you. You are the most blessed of all women!” The translation we read this morning says that Mary was confused by this greeting. But that’s not quite right. The Greek word is *dietarachthē,* which comes from the same word, *tarassō*, that was used to describe Zechariah’s response when an angel appeared to *him*. As we learned a couple of weeks ago when we explored his story, *tarassō* means literally “trembling with fear.” The word in Mary’s instance uses the same root word but with a prefix that increases its intensity. Mary may have been confused, but what Luke wanted us to know is that she was *utterly terrified.*

The angel, in keeping with the pattern, told her not to be afraid. He told her that God had chosen her. She would soon have a baby. Not only that, but the baby would be the Son of God, and he would rule over God's people forever.

Let's count some of the reasons for Mary to be afraid. One – she had just been visited by an angel, which we have well established by now is something that evokes terror. Two – the angel called her by name and told her that God had chosen *her* – a pretty big deal for just a simple girl from Nazareth. Three – she was going to have a baby, despite the fact that she'd never done anything that would lead to a pregnancy. Four – by having a baby now, whatever dreams Mary had for her life, her marriage, and her family were forever changed and no longer her own. Five – being unmarried and pregnant outside of marriage in those days carried a far greater stigma than it does today. She could be exiled or even condemned to execution by stoning, depending on how her father and her fiancée reacted.

"How?" Mary asked. Good question. But her question wasn't an expression of doubt as Zechariah's had been. Nor was Mary merely seeking comprehension. She was fully engaged in the conversation. Think about this for a moment: how many times have you gotten important news and failed to ask enough questions – a diagnosis, a family pronouncement, or good news about you or someone else? After the fact, a thousand questions come to mind; but in the moment, the mere shock of the announcement overwhelms us. So, it is notable that, despite surely being overwhelmed herself, Mary was fully present and engaged.

The angel told her that "the Holy Spirit will come over you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." While his explanation fell short of the details many of us might want to know, it did indicate divine intervention in Mary's life. But God wasn't simply declaring that this would take place. *God's blessings are never coercive*. God could have acted without asking. But the angel's pronouncement was an invitation – an invitation that required Mary's participation. When the angel said that "the power of the Most High will overshadow you," he wasn't describing a divine intrusion or an act that would take place without her consent. It was a promise that Mary was not alone, that God would be with her as the course of her life was forever altered. "Overshadowed by God" is an image with a long history for God's people – from God's movement over the waters at creation to the cloud and fiery pillar during the Exodus, from the presence of God on the mountain where Moses was given the Ten Commandments to the glory of the Lord that filled the tabernacle. It was a sign of God's presence and protection. The angel's answer signaled that God would act – not only in the immaculate conception, but by being with Mary and sustaining her through it all.

Mary listened. She considered the impossible. Then she responded, "Let it be with me just as you have said." What amazing faith and trust! Mary's *yes* was an act of faith that would inspire people for generations to come. It was also an act of courage. All generations might call her blessed, but her *yes* would also expose her to scorn from her neighbors, danger from imperial suspicion, and a life of poverty and isolation. Mary's fear was not erased when she accepted God's calling. Rather, she faced her fear with determination and walked into it. She displayed incredible courage – not the kind of superhero, valiant warrior courage our society often celebrates, but a humble, quiet resolve even in the midst of fear.

Mary's story encourages us still today.

God calls each of us to something – not necessarily to vocation or quest, certainly not to be the bearer of Savior of the World, but to be people of hope, compassion, justice, and mercy. Maybe God is calling you to take a risk at work by standing up for your principles and speaking up for others. Maybe God is calling you to engage in relationship with lonely neighbors or to support people in need through Kairos Prison Ministry, Chat Pals, or Congregational Care. Maybe God is calling you to work with children and youth through basketball or mentoring or Sunday School, or by volunteering at Fairfax Elementary or the Early Learning Center. Maybe God is calling you to take a more active role in leadership or mission or to form a small group. Maybe God is calling you to be more outspoken about your faith and the difference it makes in your life. We are not all called to the same thing, but *we are all called*. What is God calling you to do? Are you responding courageously like Mary? What is holding you back?

We all have to deal with fear. It could be a fear of failure or a fear of letting people down. It could be a fear of the unknown – that a change might disrupt our carefully made plans. It could be a fear of futility – that whatever we are called to do will require extreme effort, but nothing will change and all that work will have been for nothing. Any time we accept God's call, we must begin by facing our fears, not by being relieved of them. New Testament scholar Boyung Lee observes, "Fear doesn't disqualify us – it's part of the process. And God promises to be with us every trembling step."[1]

As a young woman from occupied Palestine, Mary was already incredibly vulnerable. She had very little agency over her own life. She did not have access to education or opportunities for individual achievement outside of raising children. Her betrothal to Joseph had likely been arranged by her family. Being chosen by God to be the mother of Jesus was an incredible honor that would make her revered forever among people of faith. But it also significantly increased her vulnerability. What would she say to her mother and father? What would she say to Joseph? Would he still want to marry her? Would she be despised, rejected, condemned? If Joseph were still willing to marry her, what would this do to their relationship? What would it mean for other children they would have? What would their neighbors think? Would they have to move to a different village or an entirely different region to escape their gossip? What would it even mean to be the mother of the Son of God?

There is risk in responding to God's call. If we step out in faith to serve, our weaknesses and insecurities may be exposed. Our greatest risk may be *vulnerability*. Vulnerability includes letting down our guard and allowing others to see us as we really are, not as the safe or carefully constructed image of ourselves we might prefer to project. Vulnerability requires opening ourselves to the possibility of getting hurt or being rejected. But vulnerability can also build trust, acceptance, and empathy. Vulnerability creates the space for God to work on us to bring real growth, to help us be our most authentic selves. Authenticity requires vulnerability.

Author and sociologist Brené Brown writes:

> Vulnerability is not weakness, and the uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure we face every day are not optional. Our only choice is a question of engagement. *Our willingness to own and engage with our vulnerability determines the depth of our courage and the clarity of our purpose; (conversely,) the level to which we protect ourselves from being vulnerable is a measure of our fear and disconnection*. (emphasis mine)[2]

Our children attended school in Oberlin and Shaker Heights, both of which follow the International Baccalaureate curriculum. International Baccalaureate identifies ten attributes that they strive to instill in all learners, including being principled, open-minded, and reflective. But the attribute that has always resonated most with me is "risk-taker." IB isn't encouraging the kind of daredevil feats kids might try on the playground; that happens in every elementary school. Striving to be a risk-taker means not playing it safe all the time, stepping out of your comfort zone, being willing to try new things even knowing you might not be good at them or turn out to like them. They teach kids to understand that we learn something from every experience, even the ones that don't turn into successes.

I think that applies well to our faith. Not everything we do is going to bear fruit, at least not right away. We all have spiritual gifts: unique abilities God has given us for building up the community of faith together. But those gifts aren't manifested the same way in everyone who shares them. We each have different passions, different interests, different affinities. Putting our spiritual gifts to work means that sometimes we try things that don't work out. That's okay, because there are many ways of using our gifts, and God has need of them all. It's in taking the risk to try that we discover how God may be uniquely calling us.

What is God calling you to do or to be? What's holding you back from saying yes? *No* is always an option. God is not coercive. And you might have many reasons to say "no" or "not yet." Submitting to God's call can be a terrifying thing. But it can also be the most rewarding thing you've ever done. There is an old saying: "If God calls you to it, God will see you through it." That doesn't mean that when we say "yes" our fear will be erased, that obstacles will evaporate, or that the path will be easy. But the witness of countless generations of people who have shared our faith is that *God can be trusted*.

Fear can invoke instinctive reactions: fight, flight, freeze, fawn, or flop. But there is a kind of fear that leads to transformation: the fear of vulnerability and deep possibility, the fear of saying yes to God. My prayer for us this Advent is that we will not allow fear to hold us back, to keep us from going where God is calling us to go, but that we will be open to God's calling with trembling faith. The God who entered our world in Jesus is with us, still seeking to be born in our hearts. Trust in God to transform fear into hope. Amen.