

“Fear Not, Mary!”
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Text: Luke 1:26-38
Myers Park Presbyterian Church
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26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, ‘Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.’^{} ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.’ ³⁴Mary said to the angel, ‘How can this be, since I am a virgin?’^{*} ³⁵The angel said to her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born^{*} will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God.’ ³⁸Then Mary said, ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’ Then the angel departed from her.*

Everything was going great for Mary, or so it would seem. The possibilities for a young woman in her day were pretty limited, but in her world she had it all. Growing up, she played by the rules; faithful to God, faithful to her family, faithful to her fiancé. Engaged to a good man, Joseph, who had a good job and would be able to provide for them. Her whole life lay ahead of her. She would marry, start a family, have a great life.

All that came crashing down when an other-worldly presence appeared in her bedroom one night with a strange greeting. “Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you...Don’t be afraid...you’re going to have a baby.” With that, Mary’s world is turned inside out. Can you see her? Can you feel the knot forming in her stomach born of the anxiety erupting within her? Can you see the beads of sweat forming on her brow as her heart rate accelerates? Can you imagine the fear frothing within that young, unmarried woman, whose pregnancy could potentially mean a death sentence? Can you see that anxious young woman?

She’s not that hard to imagine in our world. Our society is filled with anxious young people. One recent study put it this way: “As the first generation raised on the internet and social media, as a generation that came of age in the wake of one of the worst recessions in modern history, and as a generation still grappling with increased economic uncertainty and worsening financial prospects, Millennials are experiencing anxiety like no other generation.”¹

The generation behind the millennials, those in college now and younger, will soon replace the Millennials as the most anxious generation. When I entered college in the fall of 1984, the Higher

¹ Richard Scheffler, PhD; et al. “The Anxious Generation: Causes and Consequences of Anxiety Disorder Among Young Americans,” Policy Paper published by University of California at Berkeley. Cited here: https://gspp.berkeley.edu/assets/uploads/page/Policy_Brief_Final_071618.pdf

Education Research Institute began asking incoming college freshmen if they “felt overwhelmed by all they had to do.” In 1985, 18% of college freshmen said they did. By 2010, it was up to 29%. Last year, it jumped to 41% of college freshmen feeling overwhelmed by all they had to do. In another study, the American College Health Association found that 62% of college undergraduates have experienced “overwhelming anxiety” in the past year, up from 50% in 2011.² It’s not hard to imagine anxious young women and men in our world. While they may not face the acute anxiety of young Mary, they are just as frightened about their futures; just as anxious about their lives. As the father of a junior and a freshman in college, I’ll confess these statistics make me anxious.

A recent *New York Times* article cited the work of Dr. Suniya Luthar, a professor of psychology at Arizona State University who has studied distress and resilience in teenagers. She found young people who live with economic privilege are among the most emotionally distressed in our country. She writes, “These kids are incredibly anxious and perfectionistic...the biggest single stressor is that they never get to the point where they can say, ‘I’ve done enough, and now I can stop,’ ...There’s always one more activity, one more A.P. class, one more thing to do in order to get into a top college. Kids have a sense that they’re not measuring up. The pressure is relentless and getting worse.”

Our kids aren’t alone in this. Anxiety is inherent to the human condition. Theologian Paul Tillich speaks of this anxiety. At every level of our existence, personal, relational and societal, we have certain inherent passions. On a personal level, for example, we have a passion for self-preservation. We want to live. And yet, we also have inherent vulnerabilities. We are finite beings who will at some point die. This tension between our passions and our vulnerabilities creates an inherent anxiety in us. Of course, we not only want to live, we want our lives to have meaning and purpose, we want to achieve, we want to succeed, we don’t want to fail, we don’t want to fall short, we want to measure up. These passions are the anxiety factories within us.

These anxieties are within us all, they are within our young people in epidemic proportions. They were no doubt within Mary that night when Gabriel’s proclamation changed her life forever. “Do not be afraid,” he said. Easier said than done. Do not be afraid of what this means for you? Do not be afraid that you will be branded an adulterer who betrayed your fiancé? Do not be afraid to be publicly humiliated and potentially stoned to death? How exactly does that work, Gabriel?

How does it work with the anxieties that possess us in the modern world? Do not be afraid of that bad grade? Do not be afraid of that mediocre test score? Do not be afraid of not getting into the college of your dreams? Do not be afraid that your life doesn’t seem to measure up to all those other images spread across social media? Do not be afraid of failure? Do not be afraid of the competition? Do not be afraid of your finitude? Easier said than done.

What is the basis of Gabriel’s proclamation? How can he say to this young woman facing a life changing, if not life threatening reality something as banal as “Don’t be afraid?” How can he say this? “The Lord is with you.” The Lord is with you. That’s it. That’s the basis of Gabriel’s proclamation. The Lord is with you in this, Mary. You are not alone. Your future is in God’s hands, not in the hands of those who might judge you. And with God, nothing is impossible. In the end, that’s enough for Mary. “Here I am, the

² Benoit Denizet-Lewis. “Why Are More American Teenagers than Ever Suffering from Severe Anxiety,” in the *New York Times Magazine*, October 11, 2017. Cited here: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/11/magazine/why-are-more-american-teenagers-than-ever-suffering-from-severe-anxiety.html>

servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word.” Her life goes on to take a direction she never could have imagined. Through her, the world is forever changed.

Do not be afraid...the Lord is with you. It was enough for young Mary. Is it enough for us? In a world where the demands to constantly excel, to achieve, to succeed, a world where meaning and significance are determined by SAT scores or college admission or career path or zip code or corner office or whatever we choose to define our lives, is the presence of the Lord with us enough to help us face our fears? Is God’s presence enough to ease the anxiety that too often defines our existence?

It can be. If the presence of the Lord transcends all those other things, it can be. If God’s presence with us, God’s claim upon us is our primary our identity, our “ultimate concern,” as Paul Tillich put it, then we can face our fears. Tillich describes it this way:

“If, in the power and passion of such an ultimate concern, we look at our finite concerns (jobs, bills, grades, etc.), everything seems the same and yet everything is changed. We are still concerned about all these things, but differently—the anxiety is gone! It still exists and tries to return. But its power is broken; it cannot destroy us anymore. [We] who are grasped by the one thing that is needed have the many things under [our] feet. They concern [us], but not ultimately, and when [we] lose them [we] do not lose the one thing [we] need and that cannot be taken from [us].”³

Grounding our lives in God, in the ultimate concern, we find what Tillich calls, “The courage to be.” Of that courage, Tillich writes,

The courage to be is an ethical act in which [we] affirms [our] own being in spite of those elements of [our] existence which conflict with [our] essential self-affirmation [This] courage must be rooted in a power of being that is greater than the power of oneself and the power of one’s world.⁴

What is that power? It is the power proclaimed in the angel’s proclamation: “The Lord is with you.”

We glimpsed this power this past week in the lives of two families of Myers Park Presbyterian Church who faced death with no anxiety; Peter McKay and Tim Croft, and their spouses Dee Dee McKay and Margaret Croft. Peter and Tim could not have experienced the peaceful passings they did, surrounded by family and love, had it not been for the faithful work of Dee Dee and Margaret. Together they all demonstrated what ultimate concern looks like. They showed us “the courage to be” in the face of death. Their final days were filled not with angst, but with laughter—and with tears, tears born of love and thanksgiving. But there was no anxiety. Death had lost its sting because they knew, in life and in death we belong to God, the ultimate concern. They knew, the Lord was with them.

What might that look like for the rest of us? Need we wait for our time to die to center our lives in the ultimate concern, to ground our lives in God, whom Tillich described as “The Ground of Being? What if our ultimate concern was not financial or social or political? What if it were not our GPA, or what college we get into, or what kind of bonus we’ll get at year end, or what club we belong to or what zip

³ Paul Tillich. *The New Being* (Scribners: New York, 1955,) pp. 159-160.

⁴ Paul Tillich. *Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), p3.

code we live in? What if our ultimate concern was God; God's will for our lives, God's gifts in our lives, God's call on our lives?

If we could discover this, then perhaps in the midst of the hopes and fears of all our years, we could say with our sister Mary, "Here I am, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your will."