

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Second Sunday of Advent
Sunday, December 4, 2022
10am

Text: Isaiah 11:1-10 & Luke 1:26-38 (NRSVUE)

[prayer]

Do you remember the first time you felt afraid?

I know this was not the first time, but I have a particular memory of being chased by a bumblebee as a child. My grandfather grew impatient and swatted the bee with his hat, which took care of the matter. But I still have a bee phobia. At picnics and BBQs, I am prone to jumping out of my seat whenever a bee is buzzing around. (In my defense, I have never been stung!)

We often outgrow the little things we were afraid of as children. I once was afraid of needles; that resolved itself after I spent a weekend in the hospital with appendicitis. Now I get shots and donate blood without any trouble.

But then there are the fears that are deeply rooted in us as human beings. The fear of being alone. The fear of pain. The fear of the other. The fear of death. These are instinctual fears, fears ingrained in our creatureliness, our need to survive. There are also more existential fears, fears related to our identity: The fear of failure. The fear of being forgotten. The fear of the unknown. The fear of losing control. These fears are much harder to shake.

Many times, our choices and behavior can be driven by one of these fears, whether we are aware of it or not. Which is perhaps why “Do not be afraid” is the most repeated command in the Bible. It appears 365 times – one for every day of the year. Perhaps that is by God’s design; perhaps we need a daily reminder not to let our fear control our choices.

Today’s Scripture lesson is about a lot of things, but it is especially about making a choice in the face of fear. We are overly familiar with this story – accustomed to

sermons and literature and artwork that depicts Mary as demure, submissive, the model Christian. But today I want you to set aside what you think you know about Mary and ponder instead the magnitude of what God is asking of her.

We know from historical context that Mary is probably a young teenager, fourteen or so, when she is betrothed to Joseph, an older man. Her father will have arranged the marriage for her; this was typical of the time and culture. A woman was the property of her husband, father, brother. Marriage and motherhood were normally her only options, certainly for a young woman from a rural village in Palestine.

So, Mary likely has little choice in her betrothal to Joseph. According to ancient custom, she continues living in her father's house for a year after the engagement is arranged; at the end of that year, Joseph will take her to his home and consummate the marriage. But legally, the marriage was fixed on the date of their engagement. Mary is technically already Joseph's wife at the Annunciation.

When the angel Gabriel tells Mary "Do not be afraid," he has good reason. Angelic visitations in the Bible are frequently accompanied by this command because in the Bible angels are terrifying. Ezekiel describes them as human-animal hybrids with four faces. The seraphim in the Book of Revelation have six wings and burn like fire. The angel Gabriel is what the Hebrews called a *mal'akh* – a messenger. *Mal'akh* look like human beings, but not the kind of majestic, winged human you probably have in mind. They come disguised as strangers or in a warrior's guise – think the angel with the flaming sword in the Garden of Eden.

Luke tells us that when Gabriel appears to Mary, she is "perplexed" which can also be translated "disturbed," "agitated," or "deeply troubled." If Mary is not troubled by Gabriel's appearance, she certainly is troubled by his announcement: "You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High" (vv. 32-33).

Mary has a lot to lose if Gabriel's announcement is true. This divine pregnancy would be a scandal. She would be risking her marriage to Joseph and bringing shame on her family. Her reputation would be damaged, making it difficult to marry again if Joseph divorces her. She could be isolated from her synagogue and

denied fellowship with her faith community. Not to mention, who will help her raise this child?

How afraid Mary must have felt contemplating what God was asking of her, the fear of losing everything if she said yes to God!

And beneath all this fear is the awareness of what this pregnancy will do to her body. Mary knows that saying yes to God means that her body will no longer be hers alone. Saying yes means she will become God's surrogate.

Mary is living in a time and culture where women had very little ownership over their bodies. Our national debate over abortion, which is fundamentally a debate about bodily autonomy and consent, is reason enough to stop and wonder how Mary felt about this unplanned pregnancy. Later in Luke 1, when Mary sings her Magnificat, she describes herself as blessed. But this is not her initial response to Gabriel. Instead, she asks, "How can this be?"

Let's just stop and marvel for a moment at the courage Mary had to possess to question an angelic emissary of the Almighty God. Despite her youth and her fear, she has enough dignity and presence of mind to gather the information she needs to give informed consent. She asks, *How is it that I am going to get pregnant?*

Gabriel explains: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" (v. 35). The word overshadow means to tower above and cast a shadow over. In English this is a menacing image. But in the Bible to be overshadowed is to be covered by God's power. God's glory will descend upon Mary like a protective covering. In this way, God will be with Mary, and she will conceive Emmanuel: God with us.

Perhaps it is this promise of God's presence that ultimately convinces Mary to say yes. In the end, she blesses Gabriel's announcement with these words of consent: "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (v. 38).

Church tradition highlights these words as the reason why Mary is so favored in God's sight. God may have chosen Mary precisely because God knew she would

consent. But I believe Mary found favor with God not solely because she said yes, but because she said yes despite her fear.

The artist of today's artwork, Carmelle Beaugelin, wrote in her artist's statement: "In Mary's 'yes'...we see the transformation of a young teenage girl from fearful to determined, from simply accepting to deciding, from passivity to agency, from betrothed to surrogate mother of God—an honor rarer than gold. Perhaps the most remarkable annunciation in this passage is not the messenger's revelation to Mary, but Mary's 'yes' to the call."¹

Fear tries to take away our agency. But faith gives us our agency back. Faith does not eliminate our fear; I am confident Mary's fears did not disappear the moment she submitted to the will of God. But faith chooses to believe that God's promises to us are bigger than our fears. And there is nothing bigger than God's promise to be with us. God promises to be with Mary, and when she chooses that promise over her very real fears, she becomes God's creative partner in salvation history. Even though she is afraid, she receives the call of God upon her life and thus becomes the *Theotokos*: The "God-bearer" and Mother of God. Through Mary God fulfills God's promise to us: To be among us, to dwell in the midst of His people (Rev 21:3). Through Mary's courageous 'yes' God becomes human, so that now when we say to one another "The Lord be with you" we mean it! The Lord be with you because the Lord *is* with you – the Incarnate One, Immanuel, one of us.

Isaiah 11 prophecies that the Messiah Mary bears will delight in the fear of the Lord (v. 3). This fear is different than the word Gabriel uses when he tells Mary not to be afraid. To fear the Lord is to love God. God's call upon our lives pits our deepest fears against the great potential God has planted in each of us as His children to reflect His image to the world. Too often fear crowds out God's command to be doers of justice and lovers of mercy. But Scripture teaches us that perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4:18). Jesus delights in the fear of the Lord and teaches us to do the same. We find favor with God when we choose God's way of being over fear's way of being. And when we find favor with God, we are invited, like Mary, to be creative partners in building the peaceable kingdom Isaiah prophecies.

¹ "Mary's Golden Annunciation" by Carmelle Beaugelin. Artist's statement. A Sanctified Art, LLC. sanctifiedart.org.

On this second Sunday of Advent, we hear the angel Gabriel's announcement to Mary: "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." And our hearts are filled with hope and peace because that greeting is directed at us, too. We know the Lord is with us, no matter what we fear.

Amen.