

# Hopkins South Monterey

## United Methodist Church

Affecting Lives Through Jesus Christ

Scripture & Sermon

December 4, 2022

Pastor Kelsey

Luke 1:26-38 NRSV

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." 29 But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. 30 The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 He 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. 33 He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." 34 Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" 35 The 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. 36 And 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. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God." 38 Then 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.

Prayers & Sermon

*Holy God,  
whether it's through  
angels or music,  
friendships or sermons,  
study or nature—  
when you speak,  
we long to hear it.  
In a world as chaotic and broken as ours,  
we could use your words of hope and healing.  
With gratitude we pray, amen.*

Alright, let's just get this settled: Mary did you know? YES. She knew. The Angel Gabriel told her Jesus would be the Son of God and he will reign forever. I mean, maybe she didn't foretell the details, but our scripture today tells us, she was told about what was to come. But that is a bit of what makes this part of the Christmas story intriguing. This is a pretty wild way to find out you're going to have a baby, and not just a normal baby, but such an important baby! Mary isn't exactly asked if she wants to take on this task, or if she wants to take the job. Angel Gabriel was sent by God to bring quite the life-altering news of what IS to come. The story tells us that the arrival of Gabriel was shocking enough. He introduced himself to Mary by saying, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." That greeting threw her, she was perplexed by receiving this kind of greeting from an angel. Those were words for her? A random teenager in a nowhere town in the peasant part of the country is not only being visited by an angel, but being called "Favored one" and told the Lord is with her? We live in a little town in a agricultural region, can you imagine sitting in your house one day, just living life, getting ready to get married soon, and suddenly an ANGEL, a celestial being, comes and says your a favored one of the Lord? Bonkers! It's no surprise that Mary is perplexed, disturbed, deeply troubled from the start.

The Angel responds with what has become routine for angel visits to humans as we hear throughout scripture, "Do not be afraid." Angels really need a better marketing team, if this always has to be part of their opening words. But joking aside, that phrase, "Do not be afraid" is the most common phrase in the Bible. Something a lot of people that went on to do amazing things with God had to hear early in their journey. Mary was no different. Gabriel could tell she was already disturbed, and she had yet to even hear the message Gabriel had to share. So, Gabriel calls her by name, starting with "Do not be afraid, Mary" and goes on to share with her that she will conceive a son, who will be named Jesus. He will be great, the Son of the Most High, and be on the throne of David, reigning over the house of Jacob forever." We aren't told how Mary was feeling at this moment, but I think it is fair to assume that her fear had not gone away by Gabriel telling her to not be afraid and then following it up with some pretty intimidating news. I think if I were in Mary's shoes at this point, there would be many beats of silence before maybe I would muster an, "Uh.....what?" But young Mary had it together a bit more than I would, or at least those who remembered and retold the story did her the service of moving along to the coherent words she asked in response, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" I love this question she asks. She heard this from an angel, and she has the boldness, bravery, and dignity to question this messenger of God how this was happening. Wil Gafney, a bold biblical Scholar, Hebrew Bible professor, and Episcopal priest wrote an opinion piece digging into this moment in Mary's journey through the lens of our understanding of consent today. She celebrates that "Before Mary said, "yes," she said, "wait a minute, explain this to me."" In a world and time that she had so little control over her life, her choices, and her future, she makes space for her concerns. This is another moment that it sounds like she has little choice in what will happen with her, but she speaks up and takes what control she can. Wil Gafney notes that, "She doesn't ask what her intended will say, what her father will say, what about the shame this would likely bring on her, her family, and their name....In her question, "How can this be?" I hear, "Since I have not done and will not do what you are

suggesting—just in case you are really here to defraud me and my intended—how will this thing work.”

Mary has plenty of reasons to be freaking out. She has plenty of reasons, including the social impact and questions she would receive through this unconventional pregnancy and claims of immaculate conception. Mary had plenty of reason to be quite afraid at the prospect of carrying, birthing, and being a mother to the Son of God. Do not be afraid this random Angel says? Come on. No way that is actually resolving all of her worries and concerns. Who wouldn't be feeling some fear and have some questions after all she had just heard? But the angel doesn't seem to be fazed by Mary's question. The angel shares with her that this pregnancy will happen by the power of the Holy Spirit and the child will be holy. The angel must know that Mary's question of how goes a bit beyond the mechanics of it all, and she would be helped by an example. So Gabriel goes on, sharing about her cousin Elizabeth who is currently 6 months pregnant after being barren by the power of God. He shares the point of that example plainly, “For nothing will be impossible with God.” Again, the narrative doesn't tell us much about Mary's non-verbal, or emotional, response, but we do get some more words from Mary. Once again, she seems to have it way more together than I imagine I would in her shoes. She responds at this point with, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” What do you think changed Mary's mind? Or at least settled her mind? What was it that convinced her to trust Gabriel's words and accept the call? What—or who—gave her the strength to summon her courage and face what came ahead with acceptance? I doubt it was Gabriel's simple request of “Do not be afraid.” The more assuring words that Gabriel gives are telling her that God will be with her through the Holy Spirit and the holy child that will be growing within her. It is the assurance of God with her that brings her to the place where she says, “Here I am, let it be.” She was told this would happen, but the power of this moment is that she accepts the call. The artist for this week's scripture inspired painting, Carmelle Beaugelin, focused on this moment as she created her work. She shared in her statement, “There is not much commentary regarding Mary's consent to motherhood. She is often portrayed as a humble, yet passive, “accepter” of a fate predestined for her.” She says of her piece, “Mary's Golden Annunciation depicts not only a remarkable encounter, but also the moment that divinity in human form was conceived. It is my speculation that the divinity of God entered Mary's body no sooner than Mary's “yes” went out from her mouth. In a time when women had few options other than marriage, Mary's consent to a potentially unwed motherhood is a brave act of subversive agency. In Mary's “yes,” uttered in her Magnificat, 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.”

Mary says yes to the overwhelming, nerve-wracking, fear-inducing task, and her yes, her “Here I am, Let it be” doesn't mean it stops being overwhelming, nerve-wracking, and fear-inducing. She doesn't say yes because suddenly it all made sense and looked like it would be easy and fine. Mary's story is one that has been told and retold and has meant so much to so many because she accepts the call to do something so big and scary, and finds peace, not despite that fear, but along with that

fear because of her trust that God will be with her. Her story is not one to teach us or remind us to passively accept whatever God puts before us or not to question what God calls us to. Mary's story tells us that sometimes God calls us to big things, things that are scary or we worry we aren't cut out to do, and it is okay to be afraid and say yes to the call. Despite the direct request from Gabriel, "Do not be afraid," Mary doesn't just roll over, feel fine, and say okay to what God has in store for her. Mary questions how it could be possible, she doesn't rejoice and celebrate at being called the favored one and being the one picked to do something big for God. Mary questions it, does not hide her fear in front of the messenger for God, and accepts the call alongside all those complicated feelings. Perhaps the opposing emotions of fear and the peace of acceptance are what we are supposed to sit with from this story. Remembering that real side of Mary's story makes it so much more relatable. So many of us have had moments in our own journeys where we had to find acceptance alongside fear. So many are faced with complicated emotions, fear, grief, and pain and you know what, even the good news of the Gospel, the coming of the Son of God, isn't enough to take away the fear, grief, and pain. And that's okay! Trying to ignore or move past those complicated feelings with the gospel can leave us with hollow hope. Mary's story is not one that tells us the coming of Jesus fixes everything bad or we should only feel happiness at the call of God. Mary's story tells us that God meets us in our fear. God comes alongside us in our fear and trepidation and pain and in not journeying alone, we can find peace alongside all the rest. Mary reminds us that we can find peace and still be anxious, we can have courage and still be afraid, and we can hold onto hope and still be grieving. Just as Mary did, we too can do it scared.

This is a powerful reminder that it seems people need in recent times. There is much to be nervous, anxious, worried about. There are many ways that living out the loving Kingdom of God can feel like a risky thing to do in our normal lives. In this era where we see so many on tv and social media that make so much look so easy, it is important to remember that many of the most important things have happened alongside fear and anxiety. Mary heard the call on her life to mother the Child of God and said yes and found courage and bravery alongside her fear and concern. So many of the other most famous people from our scriptures go forth and do what God calls them to in the midst of fear. Many of the biggest leaders throughout our history that fought for what was right weren't without fear or nerves. Some of those who are "famous" these days are those that are popular on social media. One of the more recent people who has become quite famous is a woman named Elyse Myers. She became famous the last couple of years by telling honest versions of stories of her life of things that went imperfectly or even disastrously. Since she became more popular, she has shared more about herself and how she lives with social anxiety and has always been one of the awkward ones in the room. But now she has a full-time career of sharing herself on the internet for the whole world to see. One of her videos that stuck with me since I saw it maybe 6 months ago or so was a short video where she shared her answer to a frequently asked question: How do you manage your nerves? Her answer? "I don't. I don't, I just do it scared." Perhaps that determination is what we see in Mary in her interaction with Gabriel. Perhaps we can find that determination alone, but Mary gives us the example that when we are afraid we don't have to hide that from God, we don't have to push that aside to be with God, we don't have to fix it to follow God's call.

God meets us in our fear. God walks with us in our anxiety. God holds us in our grief. We are not alone in anything we do, but especially in whatever God calls us to. It is okay to be afraid or nervous about what God calls us to do, but Mary challenges us to go with God. And when we go with God, while fear or anxiety or grief may be with us, but we can also find peace as we go forward and do it anyway. Starting with many long before Mary, in a big way with the birth of Jesus through Mary, and with many, many after the life of Jesus on earth, God has shown up in the midst of the hardest things. From generation to generation, God shows up in the midst of our fear and uncertainty and confusion. From generation to generation, faithful people have said, “yes,” despite apprehension. From generation to generation, our ancestors in faith have accepted the invitation.

Hear these words of poetry that may help us hold onto Mary’s story in a new way.

### **Love Comes Running by Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed**

I remember  
the first time I was afraid.  
I was a child.  
It was a nightmare.  
*(You remember those pesky  
monsters under the bed.)*  
I remember  
minutes felt like hours.  
I begged  
the sun to rise.  
*(Fear always begs  
the sun to rise.)*

Eventually,  
after minutes that felt like hours,  
I cried out.  
My dad came running.  
He sat at the edge of my bed.  
He said there is no reason to be afraid.  
He checked the closet and the floorboards.  
He rearranged my pillows.  
He said, “*I can stay.*”  
And that’s when I learned  
that when you are afraid,  
love always comes running.  
Love says, “*I can stay.*”

That’s what God does for us.  
God sits at the edge of the bed.  
God checks the closet and the floorboards.

God says, *"Be not afraid."*  
God stays until sunrise.  
Love always comes running.

call to confession

*Fear can be a good thing. It can help us be attentive while driving down the highway. It can*

*alert us to possible accidents. It can motivate us to do our best.*

*However, fear can also be harmful.*

*For so many of us, fear of the other, fear of failure, or fear of the unknown has led us to make sinful choices in our lives—choices such as building walls or tearing others down.*

*Today, in confession, we ask for mercy and pray for guidance. As we confess, we come before an entirely merciful and loving God who says to us, "Do not be afraid." Let us pray:*

prayer of confession

***Patient God,***

***you know just how often***

***we make decisions from a place of fear rather than love.***

***You know just how often***

***we allow fear to take the place of logic,***

***fanning unhealthy fires in our lives.***

***You know just how often***

***we tuck your words, "Do not be afraid"***

***on dusty shelves and in the back of closets,***

***stubbornly holding onto our own point of view.***

***Forgive us for giving fear the microphone.***

***Silence the voices of scarcity, shame, and rejection,***

***which spark and feed so much of our fear,***

***to recenter us in love.***

***With hope we pray, amen.***

words of forgiveness

*Family of faith,*

*even when we forget God's words,*

*God does not forget us.*

*Even when we lose our way,*

*God does not lose us.*

*Even when we fall short or make mistakes,*

*God forgives and holds onto us.*

*We are known, forgiven, and loved.*

*Thanks be to God! Amen.*