

## HOPES AND FEARS

**Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo  
Union Church of Pocantico Hills  
December 20, 2020**

Luke 1:47-55

Luke 1:26-38

Our readings this Fourth Sunday of Advent focus on Mary, the mother of Jesus, and tell the story of the annunciation—the announcement to Mary by the angel Gabriel of the coming, miraculous birth of Jesus. It is a scene of great mystery, simplicity and beauty, but also of fear. It has inspired some of the most gorgeous art in history. One of my personal favorites is a fresco by Fra Angelico, the fifteenth-century Dominican monk who was also an extraordinary painter. He painted in soft pastels: calm, religious subjects infused with an obvious personal piety. This particular painting adorns a corridor of his monastery in Florence. It captures the moment when the angel Gabriel appears to a young Jewish girl, clearly in her early teens. “Hail, Mary. Greetings, favored one!” the angel says in Latin. “The Lord is with you.” Gabriel and Mary lean toward each other, looking intently. It is a lovely, peaceful scene, but there is in it as well an underlying tension. The next thing the angel will say is “Do not be afraid, Mary,” which means, of course, that that is exactly what Mary was, not merely “much perplexed,” as Luke tells us, but also afraid.

Of course Mary was afraid. She had plenty to be afraid of apart from this unexpected and awkward new situation. Her life would be hard. She was a poor girl in a poor village on the outer borders of the Roman Empire. Her brightest, best hope was to be given by her family in marriage to someone substantial who could provide for her. Her hopes were to have children who lived, to have a roof over her head and enough food to subsist, to live long enough to see grandchildren, and to die in peace. Her fears were realistic: poverty, hunger, sickness, widowhood, violence, and death.

I can’t help wondering whether Mary made the angel wait for an answer after he delivered his message. I think she did. After all, she was an adolescent girl and that is an age at which they ponder things deeply in their hearts. In any event, this conversation is not complete until she responds. This is not God acting alone, unilaterally performing miracles. This is God waiting for the response of a girl, who is understandably frightened. And when the answer comes, it is simple and profound: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word.”

Fear. Courage. Hope.

I’m reminded of that wonderful line in the carol “O Little Town of Bethlehem”:  
“The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”

Whatever our hopes for the future, I think many of us are feeling afraid this Christmas. It’s a different kind of fear than we’ve known previously in our lives. What’s frightening us now is the chaos and uncertainty caused by this long pandemic, with all the changes it has necessitated in the way we live day to day. Yes, we now have a vaccine,

but no one is quite certain whether enough people will be willing to take it or how long it will take to achieve herd immunity and get things back to what we used to think of as normal. The economy is shaky, and some of us are wondering whether we're going to be able to pay our bills if this keeps up. Meanwhile, there are a frightening number of people who still haven't conceded that Joe Biden and Kamala Harris were elected fair and square and will be sworn in next month. It's an unprecedented time in our adult lifetimes, they keep telling us, and who isn't at least a little anxious about what lies ahead.

But, you know, even if the virus were under control and the economy were going gangbusters and President Trump were leaving office gracefully, we would still have to deal with our fears. We human beings have fear hardwired into us: fear of falling, fear of abandonment, there in us from birth apparently. Later, fear of failure, fear of the unknown, fear of uncertainty, fear of aging, fear of debilitation, fear of death. Garrison Keillor remembers as a child scaring himself to death in bed at night, imagining that the shadows on his bedroom wall were monsters and the creaking of the stairway was caused by "the murderers" who he imagined were always out there looking for him. He remembers that he was so frightened lying there in bed that he crossed himself even though he was a Protestant.<sup>1</sup>

Fear is a powerful motivator. Fear sells car alarms, security systems, and fire insurance policies. It can cause us to make hasty decisions, bad decisions, even dangerous decisions, like buying and carrying a handgun, thereby significantly increasing the probability that we will kill a friend or family member. Fear prompts nations to declare war and to question and compromise fundamental and precious values. Fear is a powerful motivator.

Of course Mary was afraid—afraid of what would happen to her, afraid of what her fiancé would say when she told him she was pregnant, afraid of what her family and community would say and do, afraid of the religious community, which was known to stone women who committed adultery, and, beyond all of that, afraid of pregnancy and childbirth, as any teenager would be, afraid of what would become of her, and, just beginning in her mind, her emotions, afraid for her baby and what it might mean for him to be the Son of the Most High.

And so when her answer comes, it is one of the great moments in the Bible, in all of history, actually: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord."

It is a great moment because Mary doesn't lose her voice in fear, but rather finds it. Mary proceeds—as we must do in life—to make a commitment to her calling without knowing much about what it will entail or where it will lead.

Mary is modeling what it means to be faithful, what faith looks like: acting in the face of uncertainty, following without knowing where you will be led, trusting God even though you're trembling with fear.

Any one of us who listens for God, who pays attention to where God may be leading us in this life, may very well face a decision like Mary's. When God comes, when God calls, will we retreat in fear or can we respond and say something new, a "yes" that will change us forever?

---

<sup>1</sup> Garrison Keillor, *Leaving Home* (New York Viking Press, 1987).

What is going on in this story is Mary, a young girl, modeling one of the most radical of all the ideas in the Bible, namely that God chooses human beings to bring about the kingdom, that God comes to and chooses unlikely, surprisingly unexpected, unprepared, and unequipped human beings to do the work of the kingdom and then waits for a response, for a yes, for “Here am I.”

God comes to each of us, perhaps not in the clear simplicity of Mary’s story, perhaps not in the beautiful pastels of a Renaissance painting, but God does come, we believe, to call us to faithfulness, to love, to compassion, to generosity. God does come to each of us and asks us to be brave, to release our tight grip on certainty, security, safety, and to risk trusting God and following.

The angel’s message to Mary, “Fear not,” is the essence of Christian faith.

It is there from the beginning, in the words of the prophets to captive Israel, in lonely exile: “Fear not.”

It is there for old Zechariah, father of John the Baptist, who cannot believe his wife, Elizabeth, in her old age, is pregnant: “Fear not.”

It is there when the angel visits Joseph to tell him his young fiancée will have a child: “Fear not, Joseph.”

It is there on the hillside when the heavens open and a group of shepherds is startled by glorious light and an angel chorus: “Fear not. I bring you tidings of great joy.”

And it is there years later when heartbroken, frightened disciples go to the tomb on the first day of the week in the early light of dawn: “Fear not. He is not here.”

Faithful courage is not the absence of fear. It is the willingness to act, to follow, to be, in the face of fear.

Sometime in these last days of Advent or over the Christmas holiday or in the new year that will soon begin, perhaps when you are least expecting it, in a way you would never have imagined, God will come and ask you to be something you’ve not been before, to trust, to love, to give, to open yourself to another, to be vulnerable. Sometime in these weeks and months ahead, when you are least expecting it, God will come and say, “Do not be afraid. Trust me. Follow me. There is nothing to fear.”

Perhaps it is a new venture you’re afraid you’re not up to, or you’re facing surgery and the outcome is uncertain and you’re afraid, or you’re dealing with unemployment and the challenge of finding a new job and you’re scared, or random accidents, or that final fear deep in the human heart, what Paul Tillich called fear of nonbeing, darkness, death.

I love something the author Anne Lamott said about courage. Courage, Lamott says, is merely fear that has said its prayers.

Hopes and fears. . . . Fear not.

Christian hope lives in the face of the uncertainty, pain, loss, even death that each of us sooner or later confronts.

Christian hope is fear that has said its prayers.

Christian fear and hope are in the voice of a young girl, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to thy word.”

Because that child was born in Bethlehem, because God’s love came to be among us, the angel’s message is for you and for me. “Fear not.”

Now to the God of all wisdom, who strengthens us according to the gospel, through Jesus Christ be all glory forever. Amen.