

Isaiah 11:1-10

Luke 1:26-38

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## God Meets us in our Fear

In early December of 2020, there was an article in Christianity Today that stated that during the hardest moments of a global pandemic year, Bible searches soared online. Apparently a record number of people turned to scripture for passages addressing the topics of fear, healing, and justice. A popular Bible app called the YouVersion Bible app (I have it on my phone) saw searches increase by 80 percent in 2020 totaling nearly 600 million searches worldwide.

The most searched out, read, and bookmarked verse on the app? It was from Isaiah 41:10: “Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.” This verse was the app’s top verse globally that year and ranked number one here in the U.S. and several other countries.

The article continued to share that the word “fear” was the app’s most top searched term especially in the first few months of the year, with “justice” and “healing” trending throughout the year.

During the intensity and uncertainty of 2020, people all across the globe sought out the reassurance of the sacred words, “Do not fear. Do not be afraid.” I’ve also heard that it is the most frequent command from God in the Bible.

However, and I don’t know about you all, but these words “Do not be afraid” do not always sound reassuring or sacred to me. It really depends on the context in which it is said to me and so I’m guessing it does for you too. I have come to realize that although at times it is reassuring, it is especially *not* reassuring when I feel like the phrase invalidates or is dismissive of what I am actually feeling in that moment.

When I was a child, around Halloween time, I was always scared. Those of you who know how obsessed my children are with Halloween now probably think this is also humorous. But I did have one particular irrational fear. I was irrationally afraid of... people in costumes. ☺ Now, if you google “costumes in the 80s” those hard plastic masks that kids wore were legit scary looking. I have vivid memories of this and my Umma likes to tell the story of how I could not even go trick or treating with the promise of candy because I could not overcome my fear of people in costume. When trick or treaters came to the door, I would peek around the corner from the top of

the stairs, but I would still run screaming down the hall if someone wore even a wolf costume.

In those moments, (Umma, I love you but I'm going to give you a hard time right now) my Umma's words of "Do not fear/do not be afraid" were not helpful as she did it mostly laughing at me. And although now as an adult I can see why it was all so humorous to her, even at a young age, I also felt like she did not care that I was really afraid of people in costumes. I was just supposed to somehow quench the real fear that I had, to suck it up, to bear it, without feeling the validation that the fear was real.

I am guessing that I was not the only one among us that felt or heard that kind of dismissiveness at times when we heard those words said to us, "Do not be afraid." I wonder what it would have felt like if those words were said to me with validation of the reality of my fear and a coming alongside me to help me face it. I wonder when those words come out of our own mouths, "It's okay-don't be afraid" if we say them with a validation of the reality of the fear of the one experiencing it and if we come alongside them to help them face it. Ask yourself that the next time those words come out of your mouth.

Because you know, there's a lot to be afraid of in these days. In fact, there's so much that if we were to sit here and make a list, we could easily be swallowed up by it. So we are not going to do that. But there is legitimately a lot to fear.

And although in 2020 there were statistics to document it and show us a spike in folks looking for reassurance in the midst of their fear, seeking reassurance in the midst of fear is one that has without a doubt been searched out generation to generation. And so how do we find the courage to seek justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God when there is so much to fear, big and small?

In our scripture reading today, we hear those words again from the angel Gabriel to Mary. "Do not fear/do not be afraid." And so as we hear those words coming from an angelic messenger to a girl from Nazareth, what do we hear? Is it reassuring or is it dismissive?

We are living in times where we are aware that women and girls have been stripped of making choices about their own bodies, particularly in relationship to pregnancies. This year, perhaps for the first time in light of recent Supreme Court decisions, I cannot read this story without thinking about the implications of what a pregnancy announcement meant not only for Mary's life as a young female in that cultural context, but I also wonder if she had a choice in that matter. Did she have a choice in what happened to her? I found myself rushing to find proof of her consent

but perhaps, we should take a moment to sit in the discomfort of this possibility for Mary.

Because the truth is, with or without consent, this announcement by the angel Gabriel puts Mary in a very precarious position. Her world and context already was such that she had no ownership of her body. As a girl, and a young girl especially in that time, she had no explicit rights or voice. And a pregnancy before marriage for her could even mean death. And yet, into this reality of her life, receiving a message from an angel come down to tell her maybe the most frightening news of her life, this young woman had the courage and dignity and audacity to question a messenger of the Living God about what would happen to her body before giving her consent. “How can this be?” I do not want to gloss over this question that comes before her famous and bold “Here I am, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your Word.” Biblical scholar Wil Gafney writes about this moment saying that it is important to acknowledge and recognize the audacity in her questioning and voice to the angel asking “how”. Gafney writes, “That part gets lost when we rush to her capitulation. Before Mary said “yes,” she said “wait a minute, explain this to me.”

Gafney continues: “Even in an androcentric and patriarchal culture, Mary knows her body belongs to her. She doesn’t ask what her intended Joseph will say, what her father will say, what about the shame this would likely bring on her, her family and their name. Instead she testifies to the integrity of her body under her control. In her question, “How can this be?” I hear, ‘Since I have not done and will not do what you are suggesting-how will this thing work.’

She seems to be withholding her consent at this moment. She has questions and has not agreed to this...glorious messianic prophecy notwithstanding. Not yet.”

I appreciate this insight a lot not only because it implies a choice and a voice on her behalf in light of this angelic announcement, but also because the fear that must have surely been there is not overlooked in jumping to the “Let it be.” Did it take courage for Mary to get to the point of saying yes? Of course. Did she do it without fear? Not likely.

Because friends, if it is true that the most frequent command from God in the Bible is “do not fear/do not be afraid” I do not interpret this as an accusation on those or to those who *are* afraid. I do *not* interpret this as saying being afraid means you are less faithful. I do *not* hear this command as a command not to fear or else, but rather I hear this as God meeting us in our fear, acknowledging the reality of it and coming close to us in it. In her book, “This Here Flesh,” Cole Arthur Riley writes “I believe fear has the holy potential to draw out awe in us. To lead us into deeper patterns of

protection and trust. To mold us into people engaged in the unknown, capable of making mystery of it instead of terror.” She continues, “Find those who tell you, Do not be afraid, yet stay close enough to tremble with you. This is love.”

Church, if you know me, you know I love this story and this season of Advent. Yes, we hear it again and again year after year of the coming of Christ into this world as a vulnerable child through vulnerable people who risked themselves, whose lives were changed, so that our lives and our world could be transformed and known in a radically different way. Not by a distant aloof God, but one who comes close, one who draws near, and says “Do not be afraid. I am with you.”

And you know, in this particular story, although it is just Mary and the angel in this scene, I also believe that after her questioning, her courage comes when she hears that she is not alone. Her cousin Elizabeth, who was “old” and whom everyone thought was barren is now also pregnant, miraculously by all standards. Mary is reminded and told that she has community, that she has somebody who will also be physically with her, who will understand her, and may stay close enough to tremble with her.

I think sometimes we feel like when God calls us into something new or into courage to face something or try something different, we think we are alone. But friends, we are not. You are not alone. You might think you’re the lone ranger where you are, but you’re probably not. And if you are, widening your circle a little bit will surely bring in those who are with you. It’s also okay to be afraid. It’s okay to be afraid. But ask yourself: is that fear immobilizing you or is it drawing out awe in you?

Several months ago in another sermon, I talked about Elyse Myers, a funny and honest social media influencer who said in one of her early posts, “When I’m asked how I manage my nerves, I say, ‘I don’t...I don’t...I just do things scared.’” Some of you may remember that.

This resonated with me deeply because I think a lot of times when we are called to action for something we care about or when we want to share something important or speak truth to power, or when we feel God calling us and drawing us toward something new, something we do not understand fully yet, we are a lot of times afraid. We are afraid we will say the wrong things, that we will offend someone, that someone might not like us anymore or reject us. A lot of times we do not feel ready when we are called upon to do justly, love mercy and to walk humbly-or to bear Christ into this world. We look at those who are doing these things and they seem so unafraid, but friends, I think the truth is that they probably are very afraid but they just do things scared. And so I really continue to appreciate that simple post because she’s naming that very few of us manage our nerves before or in order to do the

right thing or say the right thing. Most of the time, when we are called in a specific moment to do what is right, when we are called into something big and unknown, we are afraid and we do things scared.

And friends, this morning, I am here to remind you, that's okay...being afraid is okay...because God meets us in our fear. God draws close to us and trembles with us. Because this Advent story reminds us that someone made the choice, used her voice, and birthed salvation, love and grace into this world. And because of her yes, even in her fear, we are shown that we too, can do the same.

God meets you in your fear.

Sisters and brothers and siblings in Christ, may you believe that again this day so that you can look to the heavens and say this day with courage:  
Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.

And let the church say together, Amen.