

What Do You Fear?

Even In Our Fear, We Are Called Forward

Third Sunday in Advent

Luke 1:26-39 Jeremiah 1:4-10
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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As I've mentioned the past two weeks, our Advent resource from A Sanctified Art invites us into a courageous question: **What do you fear?** It's an invitation to honesty—an opening to the deep places where our hearts ache, where our energy runs low. But it doesn't leave us in our fear. It urges us to insist on hope even in and through the things that shake us.

This week, our spiritual companions in fear and hope are the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, and Mary. Both are faced with a sense of God's calling, thus our calling as individuals and as a community of faith. Let's start with Mary. If we listen closely to today's Gospel, we discover that the first response to God's call is not confidence—it is confusion. When the angel Gabriel appears to Mary, her reaction is not an immediate, radiant acceptance. Luke tells us she is "perplexed"—in Greek, *diatarassō*—a word that means not just troubled, but shaken to the core. This isn't a polite spiritual hesitation; it is deep, bodily dissonance. Mary is thrown off balance. She is disturbed. She is afraid—and with good reason. Mary is young. Mary is unmarried. Mary lives under the weight of patriarchy and empire. News of an unexpected pregnancy could endanger her life, her safety, her future. So when Gabriel announces that she has "found favor with God," this blessing comes wrapped in risk. The invitation to bear the Christ child is not just a surprise—it is a threat to her survival.

We sometimes rush to Mary's yes, as though her response were simple or naïve. But her yes emerges from a matrix of vulnerability, trust, and survival. And that is precisely why her question matters: "How can this be?" This is not doubt. This is a young woman drawing a boundary around her body and her spirit, insisting on understanding before offering consent. Notice this: Gabriel does not rebuke her for questioning. There is no condemnation in his voice. Instead, he offers reassurance. He speaks of divine initiative—"the Holy Spirit will come upon you"—and divine shelter—"you will be overshadowed." There is no coercion here. No spiritual manipulation. Only promise, protection, and presence.

And still, **it is Mary's consent that matters.** She listens. She considers the impossible. And then, with fear still present, she speaks her holy, hesitant yes: "Let it be with me according to your word." **Mary's yes is not fearless. It is faithful.**

Mary's trembling courage echoes another call story—**Jeremiah's.** When God calls Jeremiah to be a prophet, he protests: "I am only a boy." He is afraid—afraid of the people, afraid of the task, afraid of being inadequate. I know many of us can relate. God's response is not, "Don't be afraid because you shouldn't feel that way,"

but, “Do not be afraid, for I am with you.” **The fear is real. The cost is real. But God accompanies Jeremiah, just as God accompanies Mary.**

Neither Mary nor Jeremiah is the model of heroic boldness often glorified in dominant Christian culture today. They aren't loud. They aren't certain. Their strength is quiet, tender, human. **Their courage is a cracked-open willingness to move forward while still trembling. Their faith is an open-handed readiness to trust God before everything makes sense.** These texts remind us that divine calling often arrives not when life feels stable or abundant, but when we are simply trying to survive.

Mary, like so many marginalized young women in her time and now, was simply trying to make it through each day—navigating shame, threat, scarcity, and invisibility under oppressive systems. Survival mode leaves little room for dreaming—let alone imagining oneself “blessed among women.” And yet God interrupts her survival—not to exploit it, but to awaken her to a fuller, riskier, more radiant life. Her yes will not spare her from pain. She will bear not only Christ, but the burden of poverty, imperial suspicion, and profound loneliness. But she will also bear the salvation of the world. She will bear hope. She will bear Emmanuel – God with us. And the very Incarnation – God made flesh.

We are often taught that fear is failure—something to conquer or silence. But this Advent, we are invited to see fear as information. Some fear protects us. Some fear signals danger. But **some fear is the threshold of transformation—the fear that comes when we sense God inviting us into something bigger, deeper, more courageous than we imagined for ourselves or our community of faith. Fear is not a sign that we lack faith.** Fear is often the sign that we stand on holy ground.

Too often, the Church frames courage through the lens of loud certainty and heroic dominance. But Mary and Jeremiah teach us another way:

**the courage to ask questions,
the courage to hesitate,
the courage to need reassurance,
the courage to take one trembling step at a time.**

And God does not expect us to do it alone. After Mary's yes, she runs—maybe even flees—to the home of Elizabeth. And what does she find there? Not suspicion, not judgment, not shame—but blessing. “Blessed are you among women,” Elizabeth cries. In Elizabeth, Mary finds confirmation. She finds community. She finds safety. That, too, is part of calling. **God's invitations are always accompanied by companions.**

So this Advent, I invite you to reflect. **What fear are you carrying? Where do you feel inadequate, unprepared, or unworthy? What invitation or calling from God have you been resisting because the risk feels too great? What would it mean to say yes—not fearlessly, but faithfully?**

You do not have to be unafraid to be faithful. You only have to be willing. So again, to what is God calling you, and me? To what is God calling College Hill? Mary's words can become our own: “Let it be with me.” Let it be with us.

Amen.