

“Here Am I”

Luke 1: 26-38; Isaiah 11:1-10

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Rev. Trish Eckert

In today’s first Bible Wisdom teaching from the Gospel of Luke, we hear, “Do not be afraid.” Almost daily, I talk to someone who is afraid or anxious about something, and that’s not even counting my own personal check-in with myself!

We fear what others think of us or we’re anxious about our finances, or we’re in dread of public speaking, or worried about flying. We fear rejection, failure, losing a loved one, disease, pain, death, spiders... the list is endless.

“Do not be afraid” - it is the most common phrase in all the Bible. There are multiple claims out there that in the Bible there are 365 “fear nots” in the Bible. Of course, a lot of people note, “Well isn’t that convenient – one “fear not” for every day of the year!” I still haven’t tried to count them up myself, but one Bible scholar has noted that the King James Version speaks of fear over 500 times, and that includes the texts that say, “Fear God,” which really means: revere God alone and do not fear anyone or anything else. Just a few examples of that message:

- Proverbs 1:7 The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.
- Psalm 33:8 Let all the earth fear the Lord; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of God!
- Luke 1:50 And God’s mercy is for those who fear God from generation to generation.

As we heard this morning, Mary responds with reverence and wonder, “Here am I.”

When the angel Gabriel comes to Mary, she is perplexed and confused—and no doubt, afraid. And yet, the angel’s news is: “Do not be afraid.” Do not be afraid. We hear this refrain all throughout the Christmas story and throughout so many Bible Wisdom teachings. 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.

Think about it: Noah says *yes* when God asks him to build the ark, Joseph says *yes* when God asks him to forgive his brothers who beat and sold him into slavery, Moses says *yes* when God tells him to go to Pharaoh to say to him – let the Israelites go. Of course, we hear so often in these stories the back and forth between God and whomever is being called to do these incredible things: “Who me?” “Are you sure?” “Why me? I don’t have that ability, I’m nobody special...” And of course, there is the experience of surprise, shock, awe, and understandably, fear.

Today’s story - the story of the annunciation - has always held dissonance for me. After all, the angel’s exclamation that Mary should not be afraid is terribly unrealistic. People have been afraid in far less tenuous circumstances. How could Mary not have felt fear when confronted with a celestial being? How could she avoid feeling afraid after hearing the angel’s message about her pregnancy? Later, Mary’s son, Jesus, also felt fear at Gethsemane when faced with betrayal and capital punishment. As she watched him suffer and die, the fear and anguish she must have felt!

Through the worship materials of “A Sanctified Art” that we are utilizing this season, I wanted to share this reflection from the minister and theologian, Dr. Christine J. Hong. She writes, “As a young child, I remember whenever my brother or I were very ill I would hear my mother praying in Korean, ‘Jeh-gah dae-shin’ (‘Take me instead’). My mother bargained with God to ease her children’s pain. In my time as a chaplain and pastor to parents with sick children, sometimes with life-threatening illnesses, I have heard many parents whisper the same prayer, ‘Take me instead.’”

Some theologians try to explain the dissonance between the command to put away fear and what comes later in the story. Yet, what if the dissonance is what we are meant to sit with? This same dissonance is part of many people’s stories. Every day, people are faced with untold grief and pain, and the gospel, or the good news, is not enough to take that pain and fear away. Hope sounds hollow to those who are enduring the wretched parts of life. We cannot move to theologize the fear and anguish of those around us who suffer. Rather than gloss over the dissonance, can we sit with Mary? Yes, the Magnificat – her song of praise, which she utters just beyond today’s text - is a mark of her bravery. Still, we know—because we too are human—that courage rises despite our fear, not in its absence. Those who have suffered loss know this.

Perhaps this story and the dissonance of the angel's command are an invitation to sit with those who are experiencing the dissonance of a world moving on despite their personal struggle—a world that says, “Cheer up! Move on!” while they are still grieving. Perhaps the dissonance invites us to accompany people moving through their pain, as Mary and Jesus accompanied one another through life events only the two of them understood. Despite the dissonance, they moved through the liminal and tender space of their lives together. In other words, God moved through the liminal and tender spaces of God’s human life with Mary, even as they were both afraid.

Today’s Old Testament reading relates to the Gospel reading, through Isaiah’s description of “The Peaceful Kingdom.” We heard: “A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse,” which alludes to the Davidic dynasty, the mediators of God’s goodness throughout the generations.

In Isaiah’s vision, God’s spirit will intervene, leading to a world of righteousness and peace. Prey will no longer fear their predators. The vulnerable will be protected. All of creation will be filled with the wisdom of God. The prophecy in Isaiah paints a vision of what we work toward when we say “yes”: righteousness and equity reign, the wolf lives with the lamb, no harm or hurt shall destroy the earth, a child shall lead the way. This is the vision passed down to us: we must pursue it and make it real. We’re called to bring this prophecy into fruition for the generations that come after us. Amen.

In light of today’s texts, let us consider these reflection questions:

- What is the relationship between fear and wonder?
- In the face of fear, when have you been convinced to trust a new calling?
- Where do you see glimpses of the vision described in the Book of Isaiah coming to life? (In which God’s spirit intervenes, leading to a world of justice and peace.)