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Threshold Fear

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SCRIPTURE LESSON Luke 1:26-39 NRSVue¹

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."^{b,*} 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."^c ³⁴ Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"^c 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^d 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."^c 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.

³⁹ In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country,

This is the day the LORD has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it.

What do you fear?

Today, with Mary, we take our Advent series one step further: **Fear can be the doorway to transformation.** Sometimes the place where we are most afraid is exactly where God is inviting us into a new way of being.

As Luke opens up today, the angel is sent to a "virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph... [her] name was Mary."² An ordinary young woman, in an ordinary place, just trying to live her life.

The angel greets her, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you!"

¹ Note that there are asterisks throughout the readings, which are "live" hyperlinks (only available on the PDF format) - they will take you to [biblia.com](https://www.bible.com) and give further notation that may be interesting to the reader.

² Luke 1:27.

But Mary doesn't glow with instant excitement, for "she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be."³

Much perplexed does sound mild in English. Yet, the Greek verb here *diatarasso* is an intensified form of *tarasso*. Not just "Hmm, that's confusing," but deeply agitated, shaken all the way down. It's like a fear that shakes the body, heart racing, stomach tight, her whole nervous system is sounding an alarm.

And the messenger responds, "Don't be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God."⁴

Notice what Gabriel doesn't say. He doesn't say, "There is nothing to be afraid of." Because there is plenty to be afraid of: Roman occupation, social judgment, the risk of violence against a young, unmarried, pregnant woman. Her fear wouldn't be irrational, nor a spiritual failure. Instead, her perplexion, her fear, is information about a real risk.

Yet, fear is not the whole truth about this moment. At the very same time that the alarm is sounding, God is also speaking another word: You have found favor with God, the Lord is with you.⁵

Mary's fear is not the opposite of her calling. Her fear is the *location* of her calling, the doorway where God meets her. For Gabriel goes on to announce this almost impossible future.

"You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High."

Mary doesn't respond, "Sounds great! Sign me up!" (ha). She asks a question, a really good one, too!

How can this be (since I am a virgin)!?

That question is her way of standing in the doorway. Not pretending the fear isn't real, but naming the *gap* between what she knows of the world and what she's hearing from God.

How can this be? She's not refusing, but it's a *pause on the threshold*. A moment where fear and promise sit side by side and she says, "I don't understand how these can possibly belong together."

I imagine some of you are living in a "how can this be" moment right now.

How can this be, when the treatment plan is uncertain?

How can this be, when the relationship is strained?

How can this be, when the church landscape feels so fragile?

How can this be, when I feel so small and inadequate?

If that's you, hear this: you are standing where Mary stands, *on the threshold*, with fear and promise both in the room.

Now, Gabriel answers her question, but not with a detailed plan. "The Holy Spirit will come upon you... for *nothing* will be impossible with God."⁶

³ Also note that Mary's response is different than many in our scriptures: Isaiah (woe is me of unclean lips, surely I'll die!) and most recently, Zechariah (terrified!). Mary though, not terrified, but perplexed - a different type of fear? Maybe another dimension of it.

⁴ The angels words here show that there may be some aspect of fear that Mary is feeling, even though the Greek word for fear is not used.

⁵ Verse 28, 30.

⁶ Verse 35, 37. (emphasis mine).

And then Mary speaks the words that have echoed through centuries of faith: “Here am I, Lord!”

Yes, it’s the heart of the passage, but notice, it’s not a fearless yes. This is a ***threshold yes***. She is still in a world where her body and future are at risk. She still has to tell Joseph. She still has to face neighbors and relatives and all the unknowns. Nothing about this is *safe*.

But in *that* doorway, Mary chooses to trust that God’s promise is bigger than her fear. She doesn’t get to step around fear, she steps *through it*. Her fear becomes ***the place where transformation begins***.

Let me share here personally, because I’ve seen this pattern in my life. When I moved to Princeton for seminary, I had never set foot on the East Coast before move-in day. I didn’t grow up Presbyterian (didn’t even know they existed!). I arrived without family nearby, no friends, and with a whole tangle of questions!

Am I really called to ministry? Will I be good enough? Will I fit in? Am I smart enough to be here?

If you had met me that first week and said, “Tell me about your fearless faith,” I think I would have laughed and maybe cried. I felt out of place, unsure of myself, unsure of *God’s plan*. My body felt that *diatarasso*, that deep dissonance.

Looking back now, I can see that season as a threshold. On the far side of *that doorway* were friendships, a call in the PCUSA, a partner in life because it’s where I met Andrea, and eventually a path that led me to you. But at the time, it did not feel like transformation, it felt like fear.

I’m sure many of you can look back and see similar patterns. A move you were afraid to make, a conversation you were scared to have, a commitment you were nervous to say yes to. At the time, it felt like standing at the edge of a cliff. Later, you realized it was the doorway through which God grew you into the truer person you are today.

Fear didn’t disappear to make that growth possible, instead, *fear marked the place where growth began*.⁷

This is a different kind of fear that shows up when we are on the edge of saying yes to something hard and holy! The fear that says, “This will change you, stretch you, and it might cost you something. But there ***is life on the other side***.”

It’s a kind of fear that doesn’t always mean “stop,” but it means, “you are standing in front of a door,” a door of transformation.

Luke doesn’t end this scene with Mary’s “let it be.” There is one more verse in our reading: “In those days Mary set out and went with *haste* to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zecharian and greeted Elizabeth.”⁸

⁷ I do want to name here not all fear is like this. Some fears protect us. Fear that keeps a child from running into the street or tells you to leave an abusive situation, a fear that says this isn’t safe. I want to honor those fears and listen to them.

⁸ Verse 39. (emphasis mine).

As soon as she steps through the *threshold* yes, Mary does *not* stay alone with her fear. She doesn't try to "just be strong" in this calling by herself. She runs *with haste* to Elizabeth.

Friends, the doorway of fear is not just an entrance into a private spiritual adventure. It is also an entrance into community, into the arms of someone who can bless you, who holds Mary and says, "Yes, this is real. Yes, God is in this with you."

Mary's fear is a threshold, and on the other side is both transformation *and* companionship.

Because, when I think back on the Princeton season, and other big yeses, like saying yes to Pine Shores, what I remember first are some fears: Am I enough, do I belong, what if I fail?

But if I look again, I can also see the Elizabeths God sent along the way! The people who welcomed me when I felt out of place, who said, "We see your gifts," who reminded me, "God is with you in this." I never crossed those thresholds alone.

Some of you can name those people in your life *immediately*. A friend, mentor, spouse, Sunday school teacher! Someone who held your fear with you and said, "Blessed are you," right when you were most unsure.

Maybe some of you may be standing at a threshold right now thinking, "I don't know where my Elizabeth is, I'm not sure who would understand this fear."

And if that's you, I want you to hear this as the church's calling, not just yours: ***we are meant to be an Elizabeth-people for one another.***

Instead of ending my sermon with one more thing to do on your own, I'd like to share some communal, open-ended questions.

What fear in your life feels like a threshold right now? Like Mary's fear? A fear that is real, that matters, but that might also be the edge of something new?

Who might be an Elizabeth for you in this season? Someone you could risk telling the truth to, someone who could hold that fear and look for God's work alongside you?

And just as important, for whom might *you* be Elizabeth? Who around you might be standing at a doorway, quietly terrified, needing someone to say, "You are *not* alone. The Lord is with you. Blessed are you as you step forward"?

I wonder how God will answer those questions in your life, or what doors you will walk through, or what blessings will meet you on the other side.

But I do know this.

The same God who met Mary in her fear, who walked with her through that threshold, ***is the God who walks with you.*** The same God who gives us to one another, so that no one has to cross those holy, frightening doorways alone.

Yes, friends, fear does not disappear for the story to move forward. Fear can become the place where transformation begins, and where by grace, we discover that God and God's people are with us, every trembling step of the way.

May it be so. Amen.