

"Let it be with me"
Luke 1: 26-38 (NRSV)
Sermon by Stephanie Wieand
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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." 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." ³⁴ Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" 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 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." 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.

During the time of discernment before deciding to go to begin seminary, I kept encountering passages and even whole sermons on 'do not fear'. Now, this theme pops up quite a bit in the Bible. I've heard this phrase is present around 365 times, one for every day of the year. But encountering the command not to fear so often in a short period of time got my attention. And I wondered why.

The answer may be obvious, but it took me some time to recognize it- that I was indeed fearful of what following a call to seminary would mean. And I began to realize that fear can show up in subtle ways. A friend of mine asked on Facebook recently what people fear and the responses were many and varied - fear of not being good enough, fear of the unknown, fear of being misunderstood, fear of not being in control.

Mary must have known fear. Because before she can even respond to Gabriel's greeting, he says, "Do not fear, Mary, for you have found favor with God." (v 30)

Now as readers of this story it is easy to assume that Mary has found favor because she is extra special! She must already be a step ahead of the rest of us, a faithful servant, a devout person. But I'm guessing that is not how *she* felt about it. I'm guessing she might have been thinking, Who me? You must have the wrong person.

We don't know much about Mary before she is told that she will be the mother of God. Here's what we do know: she was a young woman, probably around 13-15 years old, much closer in age to my daughter than to me. She lived in a small town called Nazareth, and she was engaged to Joseph. Being female and unmarried, she did not have power in those days or even much of a voice in the patriarchal culture in which she lived.

And yet, in the words of Nadia-Bolz Weber, "Mary trusted the word from the angel, telling her that she was favored. And maybe that *trust* is what made her favored. I don't know the details of her life, but I like to think that she was a *normal* girl with all the struggles and inconsistencies that come with being a normal girl. Maybe the really outrageous act of faith on Mary's part was trusting that she had found favor with God." Nadia concludes by saying, "Mary is what it looks like to believe *that we already are* who God says we are."¹

Now Mary does ask a question first: How can this be, since I am a virgin? We could insert all kinds of ways we imagine that we fall short or that God's call doesn't seem possible for *us*- How can this be, since I am... too old, too young, too wealthy, too poor, too broken, too anything....

But we see God working through all kinds of unlikely people in the Bible- not just the faithful or the righteous- in fact, often especially not them. Consider Simon Peter, just a few chapters later in Luke, who falls down at Jesus feet, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" Jesus' response? "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." (Luke 5:8-10) God has a way of seeing through to our fear when we might not even realize it is there. And Jesus does not seem the least bit concerned about Simon's 'sinful' nature, and let's be honest- we are all in the same boat!

¹ Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People*, Reprint edition (New York: Convergent Books, 2016), 69-70.

Or consider Moses, who asked, “Who am I that I should go?” But again, God doesn’t really answer the question directly. God doesn’t describe Moses’ attributes that make him the perfect fit for this mission, nor does he look for explanations about his past. God simply replies, “I will be with you.” I could go on and on with examples of seemingly unlikely and unqualified people in the Bible who God works through.

So maybe what makes us worthy has nothing to do with what we have done to deserve it. It has everything to do with the God who created us and the God who calls us favored. When we recognize this fullness of God in us and for us, THEN maybe we can see past our fear and have the courage and the peace to respond as Mary did.

A second thing I notice early on in our passage, is the angel’s proclamation that the Lord is WITH Mary. This was also God’s consolation for Moses, “I will be with you” (Exodus 3:12). Listen to these familiar words from Isaiah 43:1-2,

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.”

Here again we see how God has named us and claimed us and therefore we are not to fear. The verse continues:

“When you pass through the waters, *I will be with you*;
And through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
When you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.”

It is striking to me that God says WHEN... you face challenges... I will be with you. When you pass through the waters, when you walk through fire. We can expect there to be struggles and suffering in our lives *and also* in following God’s call for us.

I remember when Micah and Adelyn were dedicated here at Berkey. One of the questions often included in a child dedication is this: “Do you promise to gladly surrender your child to the ministry God has in mind for him/her, even if it might involve going to the ends of the earth?” No, I did not want to promise that. I thought it was a little dramatic, so we took that last part out. Yes, we promise to surrender our children to the ministry God has in mind, BUT... not to the ends of the earth. Or another example, Yes, I will accept a call to seminary, BUT I don’t

know that I'm going to be a pastor. I have so often had stipulations and limits on my trust in God. And you know, God still works with that, but part of what is amazing about Mary's response is that she doesn't put any conditions on her consent. She trusts God fully. She submits her life, fully.

If we zoom out and look at the bigger story, we see that Mary, too, would face many hard times after this- from fleeing her home to protect her child when he was young, to the moment when she could protect him no longer. God does not offer that these hardships will be removed. But in whatever we face, God promises *to be with us*.

On the last day of my internship class a few weeks ago, we reflected on the call of Moses. I was struck with the question, "Who am I that I should go" because I have asked it many times. Who am I to do this work? But the most amazing part is how God has indeed been WITH ME. I have experienced that. When reflecting back, especially when I was pushed out of my comfort zone and doing something new that felt difficult or scary, I can see that God was with me- in moments of courage and a sense of peace and through others who have accompanied me on my journey.

When has God been with you? What if we were to share our stories of God with us and collect them together in community? What would we learn? What might we come to *know*?

Julian Janes was a psychology professor at Princeton. He did some interesting research on different ways of knowing throughout history and its impact on our collective sense of God. He suggests that since the Enlightenment and scientific revolution, thereabouts, we have moved decidedly toward left-brain knowing that is based in empirical science. But people used to rely more heavily on right-brain knowledge and would even expect "to experience revelations, intuitions, and perceptions of the presence, nature, and meaning of God."²

He concludes that we are no longer conditioned to look for or trust these moments- moments that can hardly be understood outside of "divine illumination". So, we name these experiences less and less, for ourselves or

² J. Harold Ellens, *Understanding Religious Experiences: What the Bible Says about Spirituality*, Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2008), 107-108.

others. But in not naming these experiences, or at least being curious about them, we can “lose our collective awareness of the intensity with which the divine spirit is always present to us.”³ Does this seem true to you? A sense of resistance to sharing these personal, unexplainable experiences? Do we even notice them? What is at stake here?

Mary was attentive to God’s presence in the form of an angel. And in the story as soon as she offers her consent, the angel departs from her. Gone. Was this even real? These thin spaces, or moments of convergence can be like that- fleeting almost, easy to miss. What must Mary have been thinking or feeling in that moment?

Now at this point in the story, my Bible inserts a break and it’s tempting to stop here. Mary has been visited by an angel and she offers her full consent to God. This is an amazing story. But I love what comes next- Mary goes “with haste” to visit her relative Elizabeth. I can imagine her questions, likely her worries, and certainly her desire to share- you will not BELIEVE what has happened to me!!

Listen to these words from Luke 1, verses 39-42:

³⁹ In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰ where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴² and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.”

In going to Elizabeth, Mary invites a witness into her story, someone who might just believe her. Someone who might just have a worldview and a faith that has space for the indescribable, the unbelievable. Someone who might reflect back to her, “Yes. I believe God is indeed at work in your life through these things.”

And it is immediately following Elizabeth’s words that Mary breaks into her song of praise, the Magnificat. It seems as if it is in their sharing together about what God is doing, that Mary is moved to proclaim this good news in song.

³ Ellens.

I think this is something significant we can offer each other in our faith communities. We can witness to each other, we can offer space to consider and maybe even embrace the unexpected, we can share stories and be curious about how God is at work in our lives. And maybe, in so doing, we can remember, and begin to proclaim, together that God has indeed been with us.

We know that Mary went on to carry Jesus in her womb, and I like to imagine this time of pregnancy, of God within her very self. What a powerful image. What was that like? How was she changed? And then, in due time, Mary bore Christ into the world. So it is with us. God comes to us, for us, calling us worthy, and asking to come in. And in accepting this grace God offers to us, WE, in turn, have something beautiful to offer the world.

And this is God's intimate and magnificent vision- that in us and through us Jesus continues to come. God is doing this in me and you and our church. God is doing this across Indiana and the states and in every corner of the world. There are Mary's in every place *bearing Christ into* families and workplaces, communities and schools. This is the call for all of us, and this is the call for the church.

May we have the courage to respond with open hands: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me just as you have said." (Luke 1:38, CEB)