

## Chasing Away Fear • Luke 1:30

Fear is a frightening thing. It can paralyze us. It can motivate us. It can destroy us. In a sense, fear must be counted as one of the strongest and most avoided of emotions. In spite of that, there seems to be a plentiful supply of fear these days. And rightly so! There is fear of war and fear of recession. There is fear over illness or death or unemployment. For some there is fear of fear itself.

The truth of it is that there is not a single one of us who has not experienced fear. Even long after we've forgotten the cause, just the mention of it can bring back all the feelings. The fast beating of the heart or the sweaty palms or the tense muscles or the panic on the inside. And there is the realization that events are happening that are completely beyond our control.

We have experienced fear as a child during a dark night or as a patient in the doctor's office or in a hospital bed. Maybe we have suffered at the hands of some ruthless criminal. Or perhaps we have experienced fear as we have seen our dreams lie shattered at our feet in a heap.

Although we may not understand her language or her times, with one thing about Mary, the mother of Jesus, we can identify and that is her fear. We read about this in Luke 1:26-29:

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.

Mary was afraid, and rightly so.

I think I, too, would be afraid if unexpectedly approached by an angel who appeared out

of nowhere and gave me some sort of strange extraterrestrial greeting I did not fully understand. There is usually a fear that goes with the unknown and unexpected. Few of us respond with initial favor to that which we have never before seen or known. Seeing and hearing that angel was a frightening experience all by itself.

But there was much more to Mary's fear than just being caught by surprise. This teenage girl quickly processed the words spoken to her. She was bright and quick and knew that God's good news could mean bad news for her. Mary's fears must have been multiple.

It must have included for her the fear of shattered dreams. Like most young Hebrew girls of her day Mary must have grown up with the expectation and the anticipation that she would be a wife and a mother. She must have thought often of what it would be like. She must have imagined what her wedding would be like. What her husband would look like. Where their

home would be in their community and what she might name her children. She had dreamed of the way life would be, and now she feared that none

of it would happen because of powers and circumstances far beyond her control. She feared her dreams were shattered.

But that, of course, was not all. For in that brief moment she also feared that her reputation was ruined. Virginity was counted as a young woman's greatest virtue. Sexual union and pregnancy outside of marriage forever ruined a girl's reputation. In those days it might even cost her life itself, for sometimes people were stoned for immorality. Perhaps she might have chosen that as the lesser of the consequences for she must have wondered what other people would think — her family, her friends, those who would stare her way and think their private thoughts or whisper their words behind

***Words of comfort only count if they come from the right person.***

her back. She might spend the rest of her life being propositioned by men who were looking for someone they thought was sexually easy.

She must have wondered about the shame that would come upon her parents and how they would deal with it. Whether they would love her. Whether they would forgive her, for surely they would never understand. Who would ever believe a pregnant teenager who insisted on her virginity? She feared that her reputation was ruined.

But she also must have feared that her relationships would be broken for she, like we, had lots of relationships that she counted to be the most valuable of her possessions. Friends of a lifetime, her parents and her family and, not least of all, Joseph, the man who had asked her to marry him. It's a vulnerable thing to give away your heart, to love somebody else and really care because then your heart can be broken. Mary had linked her heart with Joseph and now she was afraid that she would lose him.

But perhaps her greatest fear was fear of the unknown. Maybe "fear of the unknown" sums up all of Mary's fears and troubles. She was young, planning a wedding, embarking on life, ready to be grown up. She had hoped for the best and worried about the worst—but never did she expect an angel to break into her life with such news. It was an extraordinary experience.

What did it mean? What would happen? She had ten thousand questions but she really didn't even know what to ask. She was taken completely off guard. It was never part of her plan. And she was afraid of what might be.

But just as God had carefully chosen Mary from all the women of her day and all the women of history, so God had also carefully chosen an angel named Gabriel. He was the perfect angel for the job! He sensed her fear when she didn't speak a word. He connected with her heart. He interpreted the expression on her face. He understood her soul. And so, responding to Mary's fears, Gabriel gave his angel's answers.

The first of his answers were words of comfort on the outside. He said, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God." They were wonderful words. Fantastic words. Powerful words. Sensitive words. But let me ask you, when you are absolutely scared to death and someone says, "Don't be afraid," does that make you instantly not afraid? In many cases the answer is "yes". Words work. Words do chase away fears, depending on who speaks them.

When a child is sick in the night, parents often become frightened. They worry about the worst. They place a call to the pediatrician and then wait—it seems forever—for the doctor to call back. Or, there is the rush to the emergency room with the baby wrapped in a blanket. And when the doctor says, "Don't be afraid; everything will be fine", your fears are chased away.

Or you are worried about losing your job—frightened about how to make the house payment and worried over loss of health insurance. Then word comes from your boss. He or she says, "Don't worry about it. We're going to take care of you. You'll be okay." And your heart is settled and fear is relieved, by just a word.

It's not that every word brings comfort! It depends on who speaks it. Words of comfort only count if they come from the right person.

Mary heard God's words straight from the lips of an angel! And those words count. When God says, "Do not be afraid," it is enough to settle any pounding heart, enough to quiet the most frightened emotions. "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God."

Then the angel gave a second answer. To words of comfort on the outside he added the promise of Jesus on the inside: "You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus."

It was without doubt one of the most extraordinary promises ever made. It was the promise that something absolutely supernatural would happen inside of her. God himself in the person of Jesus would actually move inside the body of Mary. No longer a distant God in a

distant heaven. God on the inside would go with her wherever she went. And, as the months passed, God on the inside would transform Mary on the outside until, eventually, everyone would be able to see on the outside the difference God made on the inside.

And, of course, the promise came true. The virgin conceived and the Son of God himself lived inside of Mary until his birth on Christmas Day. The angel's answers for Mary's fears were startling and supernatural and they worked!

I think one reason we are so fascinated with Christmas is that we, too, have fears. We identify with Mary's troubles and wonders and fears. Our fears may be as different as the features of our faces or the fingerprints on our hands. There are some of us who are frightened by pain or illness or death. Others have hearts aching over broken relationships, wayward children, pending divorce or the recent death of a loved one.

The list is long of the fears we face—infertility when others have babies, singleness when friends are getting married, addictions that have become prisons on the inside, bills to be paid or jobs to be found. Fear sometimes mixes with hopelessness and results in despair. We hit the bottom. We run out. We become desperate. Panic on the inside grips and shakes us.

We need an angel. But more than an angel

we need the angel's answers to our fears. And the angel's answers are the same this Christmas as they were that first Christmas. Words of

comfort on the outside, for God still says, "Do not be afraid!" And, the promise of Jesus on the inside, because Jesus offers to come inside each one of us, to take control and chase away our fears.

That is what a Christian is—someone who invites Jesus in to live and lets him take charge.

So, hear the Christmas message to all of us modern Marys with our modern fears:

Do not be afraid!

Invite Jesus in!

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