

GOD MEETS US IN OUR FEAR

What's the scariest thing you have ever experienced? I would have to say my scariest experience was in 2018 when I traveled with clergy from around the country to bring a blessing to the immigrants on the other side of the border wall in San Diego.

I was excited that I had been asked to represent United Methodist clergy from Michigan and I had never been out west before. It was in the middle of advent, and I will always remember that when it was announced that I would be missing a Sunday during advent, and the reason why I would be missing was shared, applause broke out in the congregation. That's the kind of church Central is, right? So I flew down to San Diego and arrived late at night. The first thing the next morning was Sunday worship and we worshipped in a congregation that was located right on the border. There was a moment where the pastor asked visiting clergy to come forward to wash the feet of migrants. Tears flowed from my eyes, as I lifted this young girl's feet to place in the water and there was an ankle monitor by her foot. I couldn't imagine the fear she must have been feeling.

After worship we met with the team that would be leading us to the border wall. It was then that we were asked who was willing to be arrested if it came to that. I wrestled with this, even though I know that Central pastors have gotten arrested for lots of things. This was reality. This could really happen to me. But I raised my hand and was given a white cloth to tie around my arm that showed people I wanted to be an "arrestable."

The next morning we were taken to the border wall. We walked all together, Imam's, Rabbi's, Pastor's, some wearing white cloths on their arms, some not. We walked together chatting until we got to the ocean. It was there that United Methodist Bishop Carcano anointed us with oil for the final part of the journey. It was there that I had to give up my cell phone to someone who was not an "arrestable." We continued our journey then in silence as we walked toward the border. Then, as we got closer to the wall, drones started to appear in the sky following us. The three border patrol by the wall started to grow to 10 and then 15 and then too many to count.

It was at this point, that our group split up. The arrestables continued to move forward and those who were going to bear witness stayed yards away from us, singing songs of justice and mercy. We were in lines and we were told to take one step forward and then another. The Border patrol began to yell at us to stand back. We continued to take one step forward. Then one of the organizers asked a few of us to go kneel in prayer by the ocean where we could possibly then get around the border patrol.

My heart was racing. I had to make a decision. I could stay with the group, you know, safety in numbers, or I could go with the smaller group and pray. I was terrified. I had never done anything like this before. But I walked through my fear and went and knelt with other United Methodists from around the country.

There were arrests that day but I was not one of them. But I truly believe that was the scariest thing I have ever experienced. And yet, I knew that God walked beside me the entire way, whispering in my ear, "Do not be afraid."

Today we are talking about how God meets us in our fear. So let's dive into our scripture. You've heard this story before. You know this story. I know you know this story. But today I want to focus on those words of the angel Gabriel to Mary, "Do Not Be Afraid."

"Do not be afraid" was a kind of catchphrase among angels in the Bible, a way of telling the person in front of them to calm down before they had a heart attack. We find an example of this earlier in this very chapter of Luke. "When Zechariah saw the angel, he was startled and overcome with fear. The angel said, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah."

Angels show up and they are glorious beings and people nearly have a heart attack. And so the angels say "Do not be afraid."

But it's not just about their own appearance that angels say that. And in this passage where the Angel Gabriel appears to Mary, I don't think that it was so much his appearance that was giving Mary reason to fear. I think he spoke the words "Do not be afraid" in order to pre-empt the message he was about to deliver. It was a message fraught with danger. It was the news that she was pregnant.

Now remember Mary is engaged, which is legally binding, but not yet married and so she is still living at home with her parents and the assumption is that she would be chaste until she and Joseph came together and formed their own household.

But now there's this angel in her room telling her that she is pregnant and he tells her not to be afraid before he even gives her the news. He did this, I think because he probably knew the chain of fears that might run through her mind.

That chain of fears could have gone something like this: Joseph, knowing the child wasn't his, would call off the marriage and leave her. For that reason, people would assume that her pregnancy was the result of sleeping around. Her parents would think the same thing and might disown her and throw her out. Friends would then forsake her. She would be shamed and either shunned or stoned, (remember that is the penalty for adultery). Even if she weren't stoned, she would be all alone during the trials and tribulations of pregnancy. Even if she made it to term, she would be alone facing the daunting task of labor and delivery which included the very real possibility of dying in childbirth.

I think that it's because of that possible runaway train wreck of thoughts that Gabriel says to Mary "do not fear." He's trying to head all of those thoughts off. Now we don't have those fears but we do have plenty of fears of our own, right?

We're afraid of the political party we oppose. They come into power and it makes us nervous. We worry about what they are going to do. How much trouble are they going to get us in? And then another politician comes to power and the other side becomes fearful. It goes back and forth. Who's in power changes, but the presence of fear doesn't.

We also fear growing old or at least we fear the things that go with it. We fear that we might have to go into a nursing home or that we'll outlive our retirement funds.

We fear death, be it from natural causes or an accident or another mass shooting.

We fear estrangement becoming permanent. That adult child we're not really speaking to at the moment, what if that doesn't get better.

What if we end up getting divorced from the person we thought we were going to spend the rest of our life with? We fear that.

We worry about being unloved and unliked and being alone. We fear that if we open ourselves up and people come to know who we really are, they will leave us.

We worry about medical problems for ourselves and those we love. We worry about the cost associated with treating those medical problems even if we get better.

We worry about losing a job and not being able to maintain our lifestyle. We worry about losing someone we love to death; a parent, a spouse, a child. We worry because we've seen the heartbreak that brings. We worry about the country and the world we're leaving to our grandkids. We fear natural disasters like severe storms, hurricanes, tornadoes and fires.

If we're in school, we worry about failing a class or maybe the prospect of leaving for college. And all of these fears are possible even if they're not probable. They're not things you can just write off. Take a moment to think about the fears I've named. Add your own if you've got something else nagging you.

And then remember the angel's words: "Do not be afraid." Know that those words still apply and they apply to you. There will always be dangers and difficulties, there will always be something to fear, but we need not be afraid.

Let 's look at our art today on the front of the bulletin.

It is entitled "Mary's Golden Annunciation" by Carmell Beaugelin. She says this about her art: "Mary's Golden Annunciation explores the moment of encounter between Mary and the angelic messenger. This unusual encounter may have been startling to young Mary – a soon-to-be teen bride turned possibly, unwed mother. Yet, with holy bravery in the face of communal isolation, she accepts the call to be a surrogate mother to a son who is to be the savior of her people and the son of God.

There is not much commentary regarding Mary's consent to motherhood. She is often portrayed as a humble, yet passive, "accepter" of a fate predestined for her. But I wonder, what if the angel had appeared to Mary and she had declined? Would her name be erased from historic and religious memory in favor of another willing young virgin?

Mary's Golden Annunciation depicts not only a remarkable encounter, but also the moment that divinity in human form was conceived. It is my speculation that the divinity of God entered Mary's body no sooner than Mary's "yes" went out from her mouth. In a time when women had few options other than marriage, Mary's consent to a potentially unwed motherhood is a brave act of subversive agency. In Mary's "yes", uttered in her Magnificat, we see the transformation of a young teenage girl from fearful to determined, from simply accepting to deciding, from passivity to agency, from betrothed to surrogate mother of God – an honor rarer than gold. Perhaps the most remarkable annunciation in this passage is not the messenger's revelation to Mary, but Mary's yes to the call.

When did I first get scared those years ago when I bore witness at the border? When they gave me a sharpie to write someone's name on my arm so that after I was arrested, there was someone local I could call. That's when my heart started to race and didn't stop for a long while after that. Even writing this sermon made me feel all that anxiety all over again.

Listen to this poem from Rev. Sarah Speed called Love Comes Running

I remember

the first time I was afraid.

I was a child

It was a nightmare

(you remember those pesky

monsters under the bed.)

I remember minutes
felt like hours.
I begged the sun to rise.
(Fear always begs
the sun to rise)

Eventually, after minutes that felt like hours,
I cried out.
My dad came running.
He sat at the edge of my bed.
He said there is no reason to be afraid.
he checked the closet and the floorboards.
He rearranged my pillows.
He said, "I can stay."

And that's when I learned
that when you afraid,
love always comes running.
Love says, "I can stay."
That's what God does for us.
God sits at the edge of the bed.
God checks the closet and the floorboards.
God says, "Be not afraid."
God stays until sunrise.
Love always comes running.

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 remember it is the most common phrase in all of the Bible. 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.