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1:26-38; Jeremiah 1:4-10
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Even In Our Fear, We Are Called Forward

I remember about this time in 2001. It was Advent...just a few months after the horrors of 9/11. Great fear and unrest plagued our nation as we waged a global war on terror.

It was also a season of uncertainty for us as a family. I was half way into a year long youth position at Sammamish Presbyterian Church just outside of Seattle. Sammamish Pres had graciously offered to pay me to continue my role as the Young Life Area Director while also assisting our youth pastor with weekly youth events at the church. It was there that I was introduced to parish pastoral ministry.

It was a great gig, but one that I knew would be short-lived.

What would be next?

I talked with our senior pastor about the possibilities of going to seminary. Both he and his wife went to Princeton Theological Seminary. And so I wondered, could I possibly get into Princeton? Then fear set in as I questioned, would I be able to afford it?

Despite my trepidation, I took the first step. I applied. I was pregnant with the idea of going to seminary.

Then I waited. And waited. And waited.

Until the end of February of 2002 and I got that acceptance letter.

But how would it all work out?

God provided scholarships and generous support from Sammamish Pres that made it seem doable. Then we started making plans to move our young family of five across the country.

Each step had its own challenges and opportunities to move out in faith, trusting that the God who called us forward, even in our fear, would not only be with us but would provide for us as well.

Our Advent scriptures this morning are about two incredibly brave young people called by God to do the impossible. They were both gripped with fear, felt inadequate for the job, but yet went forward in faith, even though they had no idea how it would all work out.

The first story is Jeremiah's call to become a prophet for God. The second is Mary's call story to become the mother of God's son, Jesus Christ.

Join me now as we hear from the Word of the Lord.

Jeremiah 1:4-10

4 The word of the Lord came to me, saying,
 5 “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
 before you were born I set you apart;
 I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.”
 6 “Alas, Sovereign Lord,” I said, “I do not know how to speak; I am too
 young.”
 7 But the Lord said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am too young.’ You must go to
 everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. 8 Do not be afraid of
 them, for I am with you and will rescue you,” declares the Lord.
 9 Then the Lord reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me,
 “I have put my words in your mouth. 10 See, today I appoint you over nations and
 kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to
 plant.”

Luke 1:26-39

26 In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to
 Nazareth, a town in Galilee, 27 to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named
 Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. 28 The angel went to
 her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”

29 Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of
 greeting this might be. 30 But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you
 have found favor with God. 31 You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you
 are to call him Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most
 High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will
 reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.”

34 “How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”

35 The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of
 the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called[a]
 the Son of God. 36 Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old
 age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. 37 For no
 word from God will ever fail.”

38 “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be
 fulfilled.” Then the angel left her. 39 At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a
 town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah’s home and
 greeted Elizabeth.”

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

This morning we are going to look at these stories and ask, what were the
 contexts behind each of these call stories? What did they fear? How did they
 respond? And how is God calling us individually and collectively forward in faith?

Jeremiah, son of Hilkiah, was a young man of 17 to 20 years of age. It was then that God called him to be a prophet to the people of Judah and Jerusalem. He wrote during a period of political and military unrest, when the small and vulnerable nation of Judah found itself at the mercy of Assyrian, Babylonian, and Egyptian empires.

Jeremiah's message of doom and gloom was unpopular with the people because they continually broke covenant with God by worshipping foreign idols. He called them to repent and return to God in order to avoid divine judgment. He prophesied how God would use these powerful nations to punish them. But he also spoke of their eventual restoration and how God would institute a "new" covenant. One that would come through The Promised Messiah who would satisfy all the covenant conditions for them.

So we can understand why Jeremiah's message was so unpopular. Right? We don't want to be told what we are doing is wrong. No! We want to be affirmed that what we are doing is ok, when we clearly know that it is not.

We can also understand why Jeremiah was so hesitant to accept this calling. "Ah, Sovereign Lord," he said, "I do not know how to speak; I am only a child!"

How would we respond if we were Jeremiah with the heaviness of his calling?

God says, "Don't give me that excuse. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you."

The Hebrew word for "do not be afraid" is *al tira*. We heard this before as people encounter angels or God's presence. It means to be frightened or terrified. In Jeremiah's case, he was afraid of what God was asking him to do. He didn't feel equipped, capable, or remotely interested. To which God answers his fears with "For I am with you and will rescue you."

The Hebrew word for rescue comes from the root word *natsal* which means to deliver, rescue, or save.

Interesting. God calls young Jeremiah to do something for which Jeremiah felt ill equipped and God told him that he would be with him and save him. Who does that sound like? Jesus, whose name means "He saves." And Immanuel which means "God with us."

Tuck that away for a moment.

Fast forward more than six hundred years...about the same length of time from Isaiah's ministry to Jesus' birth which we heard about last week...to Luke's foretelling of Jesus' birth at the time of King Herod.

Mary was a young gal about 13-14 years old from the small town of Nazareth, in Galilee. We are told that she was a virgin and pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David.

Now there are a lot of important details mentioned here that would be easy to just gloss over. First she was from the town of Nazareth. In Mary's day, it was a

small village of about 200-400 people, off the typical trade routes. An obscure and unimpressive town. We learn in other places that people didn't have a very impressive view of Nazareth. That not much good could come from there.¹

But it was very important in terms of being one of the prophecies regarding from where the Messiah would come. Matthew in his gospel links the words of Isaiah calling the Messiah a branch springing up from the stump of Jesse with where Mary and Joseph lived.² A branch or sprout in Hebrew is called a netser. Bible scholars believe that the name Nazareth may be derived from this same word.

Regardless it was a small and seeming unimportant town.

Mary was a virgin. The Greek word that Luke uses is parthenon. It means an unmarried daughter but had reached puberty. A maiden. Or one who had not yet had sexual relations with a man.

This is an important detail because the prophet Isaiah prophesied about a sign of the Messiah, "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel," which means "God with us."³

The Hebrew word for virgin is almah. It could mean a variety of things such as virgin, maiden, or a young woman who was sexually able to conceive.

Mary was engaged to married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David.

The Greek word for engaged to married comes from the root mnesteuo. This implies that a contract was arranged between Mary and Joseph's fathers between them, that when Mary became of age, she would become Joseph's wife.

But they were engaged only meaning that they had not consummated the relationship yet. They were not officially married.

Joseph was a descendant of David with ancestral origins to the town of Bethlehem. That was another important prophecy about where the Messiah would be born.

The prophet Micah prophesied, "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you shall come for me one who will rule over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."⁴

The point is that right here are three distinct prophecies from the Old Testament pointing to Jesus as the Messiah.

When the angel Gabriel appeared to her. She was greatly troubled.

The Greek word used here is diatarasso. Tarasso means troubled. Dia means greatly. In other words she was deeply disturbed at Gabriel's greeting. So he said

¹ John 1:46

² Isaiah 11:1

³ Isaiah 7:14

⁴ Micah 5:2

to her, “Do not be afraid.” Me phobu. And then he goes on to tell her about God’s plan for her to carry God’s child.

So what did Mary have to fear? A lot!

Deuteronomic Law stated that if a virgin betrothed to a man has sexual relations with another man who was not to be her husband, that she was to be brought to her father’s house where the men of the town would stone her to death.⁵

So Mary had a lot to fear. She could be misunderstood. Shunned. Or worse, she could be stoned to death. That’s a pretty heavy risk to take on!

We can see that both Jeremiah and Mary had legitimate fears and concerns with what they were being called to do.

How do they both respond?

At first Jeremiah was confused. “But I am just a boy!”

Then he expressed fear. Fear is a natural response to when we are being asked to do a God sized task.

Next he inquired of the Lord, “How can I do this? I am just a boy!”

Then he yielded himself to God’s will.

God touched Jeremiah’s lips and put his very words in his mouth. Jeremiah just had to open his spiritual eyes, read the signs, and say whatever comes to mind. After a couple trial divinations, Jeremiah was ready to go out and prophesy.

God then reiterates his promise, “I will be with you and will rescue you.”

And finally he went forward in faithful trust to prophesy.

We see a similar patterned response from Mary.

At first she too was confused and afraid.

One commentator, Rev. Dr. Boyung Lee wrote, “Mary is not simply puzzled—she is shaken, thrown off-balance, possibly afraid for her life. And with good reason. Mary was young, unmarried, and living under the weight of imperial and patriarchal control. To be told—without warning—that she would bear a child by divine initiative wasn’t just a spiritual shock; it was a profound social and bodily risk. Her “yes,” then, cannot be read as simplistic or naïve. It emerges from a complex matrix of vulnerability, trust, and survival.”⁶

Gabriel explained God’s plan for how it would all take place.

Next she inquired of the Lord, “How will this be since I am a virgin?”

Again Dr. Boyung Lee states, Mary’s asking “How can this be?” is not doubt—it is agency. It is a boundary drawn around her body, a claim to her own understanding before offering consent.” Before God could go forward with his plan, Mary had to say “Yes.”

⁵ Deuteronomy 22:20

⁶ The Rev. Dr. Boyung Lee in A Sanctified Art’s Sermon Planning Guide and Commentary on Luke 1:26-39 and Jeremiah 1:4-10, page 13

And finally Mary yielded herself to God's plan, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said."

Notice that the moment Mary gave her consent, she was pregnant. God was that fast! For Luke states that she waited no time to get ready and hurried off to her cousin, Elizabeth's home. And the two were with child!

Folks, when God is ready to birth new something within us, though the conception might be immediate, it can actually takes some time for that idea, dream, or new thing to develop within us before it is actually born.

It could begin with a nudge, a sense, or an idea that something new is coming. We may wonder. We may even be a bit confused or afraid. It could come at great risk to ourselves, our jobs, our families, our community. Then we may question whether or not we heard God correctly. Slowly over time, God's little plan starts to put on flesh. We begin to show. And finally we eventually have yield ourselves fully to this new thing and committed until it is born.

I'm curious what holy nudges might we be experiencing today? What is confusing about it? What is fearful? What invitations are we resisting because we feel inadequate? What would it mean to say yes - not fearlessly, but faithfully?

Paul says to Timothy, "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity."⁷

I believe that God is speaking to us right now. As we let Mary's words become our own: "Let it be with me," we will become spiritually pregnant with all sorts of possibilities.

So let us go forward with faith being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.⁸ May we throw off every excuse that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and instead run with perseverance the race marked out for us. And let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.⁹

What have we got to fear? God with us.

Amen!

⁷ 1 Timothy 4:12

⁸ Hebrews 11:1

⁹ Hebrews 12:1b-2a