

## ***God Meets Us in our Fear – Luke 1:26-38***

**Rev. Matt Nieman**

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During the hardest moments of the year 2020, Bible searches soared online, and a record number of people turned to Scripture for passages addressing fear, healing, and justice. The popular YouVersion Bible App saw searches increase by 80 percent that year, totaling nearly 600 million worldwide.

Isaiah 41:10 ranked as the most searched, read, and bookmarked verse on the app: “So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”

There are so many others verses that address fear, headlined by these:

Psalm 27:1 “The Lord is my light and my salvation. Of whom shall I fear?”

Deuteronomy 31:6: “Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.”

Psalm 23:4: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”

John 14:27: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.”

2 Timothy 1:7: “...for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.”

Especially in the early days and weeks of Covid, these verses of scripture provided a balm to our wounds and comfort to our unknowns.

The angel Gabriel came to Mary and said, “Do not be afraid.” It is arguably the most famous phrase in all the Bible. “You have found favor with God,” Gabriel says.

And from there, he outlines for Mary what is about to happen—how she will conceive and give birth to a son and will call him Jesus. And by the end of the conversation, her fear does seem to be gone. Her fear, astonishment, her state of being deeply troubled, is replaced by a conviction and self-confidence that she has what it takes to carry out this mission.

“I am the Lord’s servant,” she affirms. “May your word to me be fulfilled.”

I don’t know about you, but I have a hard time believing that Mary, greatly disturbed over what has happened due to Gabriel’s appearance, could instantly have had her fears relieved simply by the angel telling her not to be afraid.

First of all, an angel itself has appeared. Not having had this experience before, Mary would probably have been afraid just witnessing this.

And second, you have Gabriel’s words: “You’re gonna conceive a child who will go on to be the savior of the world, but don’t worry about it. No big deal. Don’t be afraid.” Oh yeah, I’m sure that really settled her down.

So after a 30-60 second interaction with an angel she’s never met and with these striking words she didn’t expect, Mary’s sold on her call? Fears relieved?

Mine wouldn’t be.

And I think that during those times when we are most threatened, most worried, most vulnerable to crisis, an angel appearing out of nowhere to tell us not to be scared wouldn’t have the effect on me that Gabriel seems to have on Mary.

Heaven forbid, for example, that you have just gotten some awful news. Something terrible has happened or could very well happen to somebody you love deeply. Imagine the worst. And somebody you trust the most in your life—for their wisdom, their influence, their long-standing friendship, approaches you and says, “Don’t fear.” Would your fear disappear? In moments, would that deeply trusted voice have the power to erase all your fears?

No. And yet, that's what seems to happen to Mary here. By verse 38, her fears are gone. She's moved on to a place of confidence and purpose over what's coming next. It's astonishing.

So what do we do with this? What do we do with a story and the lesson of a story that doesn't seem to be realistic? "Do not fear" – we hear that over and over and over again throughout the Bible. We want to take that command on for ourselves. We want to oblige. And yet there are moments when we just can't do it.

"Some theologians try to *explain* the dissonance between the command to put away fear [and the reality that sometimes it's not possible]. Yet, what if the dissonance is what we are simply meant to sit with? This same dissonance is part of many people's stories. Every day, people are faced with untold grief and pain, and the gospel, or the good news, is not enough to take that pain and fear away. Hope sounds hollow to those who are enduring the wretched parts of life. We cannot move to theologize the fear and anguish of those around us who suffer.

"Rather than gloss over the dissonance, can we sit with Mary? Yes, the Magnificat, her song of courage, is a mark of her bravery. Still, we know—because we too are human—that courage rises despite our fear, not in its absence. Those who have suffered loss know this."

"Maybe this story and the dissonance of the angel's command are an invitation to sit with those who are experiencing the dissonance of a world moving on despite their personal struggle—a world that says, 'Cheer up! Move on!' while they are still grieving. Maybe this dissonance invites us to accompany people moving through their pain." (Dr. Christine J. Hong)

It doesn't matter your age—whether you're a child or an adult: When somebody whom you trust comes up to you and says, "Don't be afraid," our fears are not instantly relieved. And sometimes, we sort of resent somebody saying that to us.

"What do you mean don't be afraid? How can you say that?" we want to respond.

Well, in all fairness, that person knows that he or she doesn't have the power to relieve of you of your fear. But he or she does have the power

to simply be present, to try to bring comfort, to reassure you that you are not alone.

And let's face it, Gabriel really didn't have much choice with Mary. He could've said, "Mary, be afraid, be really afraid. You're gonna have a child out of wedlock, there's a good chance you're gonna be ostracized or worse because of it, and then, if you survive, King Herod is going to send you and your family fleeing for your life because he wants your kid killed."

I'm not sure that strategy would've brought great comfort and reassurance to Mary.

Gabriel was God's agent of presence and assurance in that moment. Despite fears that may not have been alleviated, Mary found the courage to go forward because she was assured that God was with her in the journey.

From generation to generation, God shows up amid 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, all the while knowing that their fears never entirely leave them.

In recent times, when I've read the story of Mary's annunciation, I've thought of a very young Queen Elizabeth II, who ascended to the British throne as a very young woman in the early 1950s and reigned for over 70 years until her death this year.

Unlike Mary, Elizabeth knew that, one day, she would likely ascend to a place of prominence that would change her life forever. But still, as her father the king became ill and died somewhat suddenly, one wonders if she felt a little like Mary did when Gabriel appeared to her: shocked, afraid, hesitant, and unworthy.

I doubt Elizabeth's fears subsided completely, especially in the early years of her reign. And yet, the encouragement she received from her family and the British public, in addition to the strength she gleaned from her Christian faith, provided the reassurance she needed that she could do the job.

She was met in her fear by the presence of God—by the human vehicles that relayed God's mercy and love.

“Do not fear.” The words alone—the command alone—is often not enough. It is often only over a period of time that our fears subside, replaced by joyful confidence and peace. Before that, and in the interim, we should find the words Gabriel used not as an impossible edict to obey but rather as a gesture of divine reassurance and comfort.

Mary would not be alone. In that stark moment and in the days, weeks, and months that would follow, she would be reassured that the spirit of the Lord would travel with her as she accepted the call upon her young life.

As we read these same words that litter both the Old and New Testaments, we should not worry that our fears may not be erased easily or instantly. It’s okay. Instead, take comfort in the knowledge that, whether it be an angel, a pastor, or a good friend, God’s presence meets us in our fear.