

Sermon – “Be Not Afraid”
Sunday, December 24, 2017
Scripture Lessons: Luke 1:46-55, Luke 1:26-38
Blythe Denham Kieffer, D. Min.
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Springfield, Illinois

The first scripture reading is Mary’s song of wonder and joy, known as the Magnificat, found in the gospel of Luke 1:46-55. The deep sense of apprehension when Mary first receives the good news has now given way to a mood of great joy and expectation. Beyond the astonishment of being the “favored one” who will literally bring God’s son into the world, Mary’s wonder and joy is grounded in the realization that the kingdom which God’s son brings is one of justice, equity and peace. Hear now God’s holy word.

46 And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 48 for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of God's servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; 49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is God's name. 50 God's mercy is for those who fear God from generation to generation. 51 God has shown strength with God's arm; God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. 52 God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; 53 God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. 54 God has helped God's servant Israel, in remembrance of God's mercy, 55 according to the promise God made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever." Amen.

Our second scripture, Luke 1:26-38, provides the setting for Mary’s song, which we just read together. Listen now for God’s word to us on this day.

26 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.

The title of the sermon: “Be Not Afraid”

Text: The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Luke 1:30

Let us pray. Loving and Holy God, we marvel that you would join us in our humanity becoming one of us in the Christ-child. Give us the confidence of Mary who brought your son into the world when we are afraid in our own life circumstances. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

The fourth Sunday of Advent may be the only Sunday of the year that Protestants are comfortable focusing on Mary, according to the Rev. Dr. Cynthia Rigby, Professor of Theology at Austin Presbyterian Seminary. Mary stands at the center of this lection, which tells the story of the annunciation—the announcement of the incarnation by the angel Gabriel. In twelve verses, Mary is described as favored, perplexed, thoughtful, and afraid. She questions, believes, and submits to her vocation. Given this array of images, it is not surprising that Mary is depicted in rich and varied ways.

She plays an incredibly significant role in our Judea-Christian faith story. It is Mary who was chosen to bring God’s son into the world. In her womb, she carried the One whom we call Wonderful Counselor, Almighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, Emmanuel and Jesus. This morning I invite us to reflect on Mary’s role in the church over the years and her theological significance in the Christmas Story.

First, the Roman Catholic tradition gave Mary a prominent place, elevating her above all women and giving her the privilege of sainthood. As tradition evolved the theory of the Immaculate Conception developed...that Mary was also miraculously conceived and sinless. This was theologically important for the church fathers because it assured that Jesus was sinless!

Another traditional belief is that Mary remained a virgin all her life. This denies Jesus’ younger brothers and sisters and calls into question her marriage to Joseph. Perhaps this belief evolved because of how closely the church came to align purity and chastity...so much so that in the 12th century priests and nuns were no longer allowed to marry and required to take vows of celibacy. Over the years, the virgin Mary lost all resemblance of humanity.

If the Roman Catholic Church erred in elevating Mary too high, to a place above humanity, making her more of a demigod than a humble maiden; the Protestant churches that evolved from the Reformation in the 16th century erred in the other direction. John Calvin coined the phrase *the priesthood of all believers*. In the Reformed effort not to set anyone apart as a saint, except Christ, Mary’s role was diminished greatly, giving her virtually no place in the Protestant tradition.

In both scenarios we lose sight of the theological significance of Mary’s role in the Christmas story-- Protestants, because we have overlooked her almost completely as the mother of our Savior; and Roman Catholics, because we have taken away her vulnerability and humanity.

Both scenarios also reflect the fear and trivialization of women's sexuality within our culture, something that recently has come to light with voices articulating inappropriate sexual behavior and harassment within the workplace in the #MeToo movement.

As Christians, we believe that Jesus was fully divine and fully human. This is what makes it possible for Christ to be our Savior and to bridge the gap between God and humanity, as articulated in the Apostle's Creed. We believe in *Jesus Christ...who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary*. If the Holy Spirit makes Christ's divinity possible, it is Mary who makes Christ's humanity possible. It is Mary's blood and Mary's flesh that make Christ human.

The good news with which Mary is greeted by Gabriel is prefixed with the words "Do not be afraid." These words are shared more often than any other command in Scripture appearing 70 times. The command not to be afraid acknowledges there is a lot in the world to fear, however, because God is our advocate we can live life with confidence and hope. If God is for us, who can be against us?

In Mary's song of praise, she reveals her understanding of how God is for us. By choosing Mary, the most common of maidens, God's character remains consistent with the prophet Isaiah's proclamation. What God has done for Mary anticipates and models what God has consistently done for the poor, the powerless and the oppressed of the world. God has chosen what the world understands as ordinary and powerless to demonstrate God's extraordinary and powerful love.

God's entrance into the world by the backdoor of a stable reveals God's character. God stands with those who are marginalized by society, not against them. And God rejoices when they are accepted and embraced by the center. God binds up the broken hearted and comforts those who mourn. *Comfort, comfort my people, says the Lord.*

Two millennia following the birth of Christ, God continues to call ordinary men and women to extraordinary tasks by placing us in the right place at the right time, asking us to do the right thing and opening our eyes and ears to see and hear the difference we can make in the world.

May the spirit of the Christ-child live in our hearts. By the grace of God, may our journeys into the New Year take us on adventures with confidence and hope, unafraid of the future because of who God is and what God has done in the miracle of Christmas in that little town of Bethlehem. Amen

Benediction

And may the God who joined us in our humanity in the vulnerability of a newborn baby,
Bless you and keep you.

May God's face shine upon you
and be gracious unto you,

may the light of God's countenance guide you and grant you peace today and always. Amen.