

“From Our Fears Release Us”
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
December 4, 2022

Isaiah

Luke 1:26-38

Today the Carroll family helped us light the candle, on the Advent Wreath, for hope. If you watch the light of a candle, its shape flickers and dances with the darkness it seeks to illuminate. As we talk about hope this Advent, it's important to also illuminate the underside of hope.

You may see the opposite of hope as despair, and I know some people experience despair in real and profound ways. But also tied to hope— and despair as well— is the experience of fear. I'd like for us today to consider fear as the underside of hope. We all have fears— the hymn we sang last week, *Come thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free. From our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in thee.*

Who among us today journeys through the Advent season burdened by fear? When we encounter Mary in the gospel reading today, and the angel appears to her and speaks just a few words: Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you,” the gospel describes her as perplexed— translations from the Greek could mean disturbed, troubled, agitated. We can guess that Mary, rather than responding right away to the angel, paused— because she was not the next to continue this dialogue, as the scripture said, “she pondered these things in her heart.” Her pause and wondering gets interrupted, as the angel then tells her, “Do not be afraid, for you have found favor with God.”

I was meditating on these scriptures, and to get into the rawness of what Mary may have felt at this strange encounter, I tried to think of a time when I was perplexed, disturbed, troubled, agitated. Let me confess my tendency, when I am feeling this way, to jump to answers and solutions, to not take that pause to ponder what this could all mean. I suspect when I do that, I miss out on some holy moments.

But there was a time when the pause was forced upon me. It was shortly after my mom had died of a sudden heart attack. When something like that comes on so unexpectedly, and when it's someone you have relied upon for your care— even as an adult— it kind of turns your world upside down. For me, my grief primarily showed itself in a fearfulness I had never known. I knew I needed help, and so I began taking the El train in Chicago once a week to meet with a new therapist for my grief. I needed to put that pause in my week, in my day, to reorient myself in this new chapter of my life. Being one who likes to jump to the fix, the answer, I thought I could just do this one thing and fast-forward my way through grief.

But that first day heading into the city, sitting against the wall of the El train, my body felt loose and uncontained as the train jostled me from side to side. I regretted not getting a

forward-facing seat, where I could see where I was going and brace myself for sudden stops and starts. I arrived at my stop, and followed the sea of people that then dispersed into each direction. I found my direction and headed to the building where I would be counseled. For an hour, I described my loss and my grief to someone I had just met.

Afterward, I retraced my steps to the EI. After walking to find an empty part of the platform not too far from other people, I grasped the iron grating while awaiting the train—because, you never know what wind or sudden act might sweep me into the line of the oncoming train. While I awaited my green train, a white guy about my age, wearing glasses, bald-headed, approached me, caught my eye and asked me, *“Do you believe that one person can be the bearer of happiness so contagious that it spills out to everyone around?”*

I eyed him suspiciously, and gauged the distance of the oncoming train. Whoooosh. Once the train safely passed us and screeched to a halt, I answered, half-heartedly. Yeah. Sure. The man then opened a box I had not even noticed he had. In it were 3 origami birds. He smiled at me and silently gestured for me to take one. I felt like a cat as I scooped a crumpled bird out of its paper box nest, clutching it lightly between two fingers lest unknown substance like anthrax or weirdness, or known substance like fear, seep out and infect me, my house or my family.

Ding dong! The doors opened and I found my seat on the bench. I left the baby bird in the seat beside me, and out the window saw the man still on the platform, grinning at me as his face followed mine until the train left the station. We turned the corner and stopped at the next elevated stop. The train filled, and the seats beside me were taken. The woman to my left lowered her bottom onto the baby bird of happiness. I felt somehow relieved.

That’s what I journaled about that day, 10 years ago. Looking back on that experience now that I am out of that sense of disorientation, I suspect that the stranger who approached me on the EI platform, giving me an origami bird, might have been an angel. He was proclaiming to me what felt, in the moment, impossible. To be “a bearer of happiness so contagious that it spills out to everyone around?” It sounded absurd to my grieving mind. So improbable, that when the paper bird got sat upon, I was relieved— since it somehow seemed to take that prophecy off my shoulders.

But looking back now, I can see that God was indeed working through my fears, to release me from them and make me a bearer of hope again, and make me even capable of letting that hope spill over into others. It hadn’t happened as quickly as my fix-it approach wanted. But it came, as promised.

Mary took a pause and I would not blame her if she had decided to invest in her fears. The angel Gabriel announced to her, “You have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.” Is THAT what favor with God brings? Pregnancy for an unmarried, young teenage girl? I have a relative who had a baby at 18. Her church turned their back on her in judgment. The Christian school she attended would not let her walk for graduation. Her young body was injured in labor and delivery. I can see

Mary's face in her experience, and I shudder to think of how notions of honor and gender could have resulted in a public stoning of a young, unwed, pregnant woman in Mary's time.

Mary also took her time to ask questions. "How can this be?" I can't even imagine how many women and some of their partners, too, have hovered over a pregnancy test in modern history, asking that same question, even though they very well know the answer, most of the time. As for Mary, Luke claims that Mary told the angel that she had not known a man. She takes the time to digest the information and have her questions addressed. The angel tells her that the Holy Spirit will make a shadow over her.

I think again of that shape of a candle flame, how it both illuminates the shadows and causes more of them, as light and darkness dance. There are still some shadows to my understanding of this holy conception, but I suppose the answers aren't for me to know.

What Mary seems left with is not the gripping, reptilian fear that makes you want to fight, flee, or freeze. It's not the *phobos*— the fear the angel warned her about. Instead she is left with an awe or wonder. "Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word." Mary gives her consent to use her body to help form God's body, to be born into the world, in human flesh. In Isaiah, the prophecy is for a shoot that will spring out of the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots... and "his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord." The Hebrew word for fear used in Isaiah is *yirah*, which implies deep reverence and awe. In other words, hope. Not only does Mary move from fear to hope; she makes it possible for the rest of us to do that, too.

Last Friday I attended a Catholic mass that celebrated the 50th anniversary of very close family friends. Each Roman Catholic church interests me in the fact that although it only allows male clergy, signs of sacred feminine power wrap the sanctuary. In this church in Queens, a statue of Mary herself stood in compassionate vigil over the worshippers while candles flickered around her. The painting surrounding the altar looked like a woman giving birth to the sacred signs of sacrament and table.

I told Carol that I really look forward to her singing Ave Maria. The first time I ever heard that song in a Protestant sanctuary was at my wedding— this was one of the ways we wove the Catholic traditions of the family I married I'd be joining into the ceremony. But in the Protestant church, I think Mary is highly *underrated*, overall. We need her as a daily reminder that God chose to be born in human flesh, and chose one of us to push that into our world. Mary reminds us that Jesus is born in us, too.

Cole Arthur Riley, an author and blogger @Blackliturgies, writes, "In Advent, we put all our hope in the sacred blackness of a womb. As we wait, we remind ourselves that darkness, which is far too often reduced to a trite symbol for sin and death, in fact has the unique capacity to bear the divine. In Advent, we reclaim the holy dark."

These days that lead us through waiting and expectation, may we be transformed by that holy dark. May the Holy Spirit overshadow us, too, leading us from places of fear, to places of awe and wonder, so that we— like Mary— can be hope-bearers for God's world.