

“You Have Called Me by Name”

Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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Isaiah 43:1-7

Luke 1:26-38

I went to elementary school in a school that went to grade 12, and it had a pool. I have always loved the water, and I remember in the second grade, my parents signed me up for an after school program there that included free swim one day a week. The thing about that pool is that it had a diving board, and also a high dive. Not many pools have high dives these days. And while I had learned to swim a couple years earlier, and loved the water and jumping off the diving board, the high dive taunted me. The joy I had once felt from leaping off the diving board, in a cannonball or a dive no longer spoke to me in the same way, because the shadow looming over me kept reminding me that there was a challenge far greater. So that is how I found myself, with fists gripping the ladder and toes stepping carefully, step after step, until I stood aboard the high dive for the first time ever. My knees shook, but the grainy surface assured me that I wouldn't just slip and fall splat. Cautiously, I moved one foot in front of the other until I reached the edge of the board. When I got to the end, I saw the aptly named Mrs. Swan peacefully swimming laps below me. Mrs. Swan was the reading specialist in my school, and she was also 9 months pregnant, so I realize now she was probably trying to get some relief from the gravitational demands of pregnancy, or even to inspire her body into labour. When Mrs. Swan saw me standing at the edge of the board, she gave me a warm, encouraging smile. “Are you going to jump?” she called up to me. She had already encouraged my love of reading.

The fear that coursed through my body nearly made me dizzy. Could I envision a future with me sending my body hurtling through the air into the water? Was it one story high? Two stories? Three? I couldn't tell but Mrs. Swan sure looked small below, even with her pregnant belly. I considered climbing back down the ladder. Maybe the regular diving board was where I belonged. Besides, although I could do a dive and a cannonball from the diving board, I had not yet tried a flip

like I had seen some of the boys do, or a back dive like I had seen some of the older kids do.

The options seesawed before me, as the board below my feet– which had been set by the diving team to the springiest setting– shook with my trembling legs. What would I do? I was terrified.

Have you ever had a fear like that?

Decades later, when I was as pregnant as Mrs. Swan had been, the same kind of fear coursed through my body. Except, it was not an option to climb back down that ladder– it was on Valentine’s Day– one week after my baby’s due date– when I was scheduled to go into the hospital to finally be induced into labour. The baby had to come out, one way or another, and although I feared the process of childbirth, the fact that there was no way to back out of it made it slightly easier for me. The only way out of this was *through* it: breathing through the pain, pushing through the pressure, until I could meet this creature who had occupied my body.

Have you ever had a fear like that?

Here is what scripture has to say to fearful people:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name; you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you,
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
For I am the LORD your God.

Here is what God told the people Israel, through the prophet as messenger assuring them: Do not fear. I have called you by name. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.

Such assurance was also echoed through the words of the angel Gabriel when he encountered Mary with a message: “Do not be afraid, *Mary*, for you have found favor with God.” It probably seems silly that God, or an angel, or a prophet would tell people on the cusp of their lives being upended, “Do not be afraid.” How could they not be afraid?

I know with certainty that Mary was afraid. I know this as closely as I know the fear I felt before giving birth, or the fear I felt coming out to my family, my friends, and the church; it was the fear I knew as a child, when standing on the high dive board, and also the fear I felt as a new mom, blessing my own mom as her life slipped out of my hands and she moved from this life, to death, and to the life to come. It is the fear that gripped me when the reality of the election results became clear as I watched the news screens reveal poll results. That fear still grips me now. It is the fear I felt when I accepted a call the week of Thanksgiving to serve a new church. It is scary to take a leap into something new and unknown, even if you have a choice, even if you know it is God calling your name, even if you are sure it is the right thing.

For Mary, I wonder how long she let her stomach toss and turn in knots. Did she ruminate over her decision before replying to the angel her consent, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word.”?

Or for Mary, perhaps it was an instant decision, like the time I heard many years back when a child fell off the platform onto the New York Subway tracks, right as a train could be heard coming into the tunnel. In swift response, a grown man jumped onto the tracks and threw his body onto the body of the child, pressing them both into the lower part of the tracks so the train could pass over them, and not harm either of them.

Whether instant or in time, Mary chose to use her body to bring forth the body that would save the world. No doubt it was uncomfortable. No doubt she was afraid. No doubt there would be repercussions for her family, her community, her betrothed, Joseph. As she pondered the things the angel told her in her heart, I am guessing she also pondered all those who would be impacted by this news. I can guess she weighed the immediate disappointment she would cause to those she would hurt by telling them she was choosing a different plan than what they expected of her. But I am guessing also that she weighed the more distant hope

that she could have a role in bringing forward God's salvation for the world, too. Immediate fears, versus distant hopes— how do these two play out in your lives? If you play it safe, and cater to your immediate fears, do you at least allow for moments when your distant hopes have a chance to grab hold of you, so that you can dance with God's dream for your life?

Each Sunday I step up to the pulpit to preach feels like a death and resurrection. It is not unlike climbing the ladder that loomed over my elementary school pool. But more often than not, the chance to preach God's word leaves me reborn and I hope at times has awakened something in you.

As for Mary, she did not come from a very high place. She did not come from Jerusalem, where the Temple lay, and where the seat of power lay that remembered the legacy of the Davidic kingship. Sure, there were towers higher than Jerusalem— the whole region was captive to the Roman empire, and so even Herod, in his high place, felt subordinate to something higher. But Mary came from an opposite direction, from Nazareth in Galilee. This small, northern town did not have the prestige of Rome, nor did it have the religious bonafides of Jerusalem. Kelly Nikoendeha, who wrote *The First Advent in Palestine*, asserted, “Jewish ears must have burned when they heard Luke's Gospel mention a girl from Galilee.’ She explains that the northern region was known for uprisings and protests, and they were considered ‘lesser Jews’ because many were uncircumcised, or did not worship in the temple, or married non-Jewish people. Why did the angel Gabriel go to Galilee instead of Judea? Have you ever experienced God in an unexpected place?”¹

Jesus was not born in a high place but a very low one. And in fact, even the shepherds, whom Luke reports as being among the first to get up to go visit the baby Jesus, were from a low place. We often hear commentary that the shepherds were the poorest of the poor, unclean, probably stinky. But I recently heard a preacher say that more likely, the shepherds were children². Watching animals was a fitting responsibility for a child back in Jesus' time, and even when I went to Jordan, I noticed that the ones calling out to the sheep in the rocky and grassy hills were young boys and girls. Like David when he was a boy, and composed songs and poetry while he tended the sheep, children while they are

¹ Keyla Craig and Rev. Lisle Gwynn-Garrity, “You Are a Blessing” in *A Sermon Planning Guide for Advent-Epiphany*, A Sanctified Art 2024

² Rev. Adriene Thorne, “Shepherds, Magi, and Kids— Oh My!” in *The Word Made Fresh* vlog.

shepherding have the chance to play and to sing; they look out for the sheep and protect them because these are their friends, as much as it is that they are their livelihood. It was to these young shepherds that the angel also said, “Be not afraid.”

We are all fearful of what the next months will bring, as we celebrate the work we have done in ministry and also grieve our changing relationship, when on February 2 I will depart as your pastor. It is a sadness lined with love. And despite the urgings of the prophet and of the angels, it is okay to be afraid. Know that fear— yours and mine— does not have to get into the way of God birthing new things in you and through you. God knows your name, and calls it, calls *you* to be a blessing. How will you respond?