

“Saying Yes to God”

Isaiah 11:1-10 & Luke 1:26-38

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Prayer for Understanding Holy God, whether it's through angels or music, friendships or sermons, study or nature—when you speak, we long to hear it. In a world as chaotic and broken as ours, we could use your words of hope and healing. With gratitude we pray, amen.

Jesus came to disperse our fear. On the back side of the barn, we had four silos each with a small feed room and an indoor mixing station. A series of augers and conveyor belts delivered ingredients to the giant 4-ton mixer. It was my job to follow the recipes, get the ingredients, mix the feed, and get each group of livestock their specific food ration. During standard time, I started mixing the feed while it was still light. Each room had lighting that needed to be turned off when finished. About a dozen times a year my flashlight ran out of battery power. I dreaded the long fear-filled journey back to the barn. It was dark except for the sparse, shadowy light from a single, high, dusk to dawn lamp that only provided enough greenish light to almost see things. My imagination went wild with all the crazy things that might be waiting in the dark to get me as soon as I turned off the lights. I started turning off the lights in the furthest feed room first. The wind would cause all sorts of strange noises, metal banging, trees creaking. There were sounds from the cattle in the barn. Wild farm cats make some disturbingly eerie sounds. As soon as the lights were turned off, pigeons flew in for the feed crumbs. Even though it was too dark to see them, I sensed them by the air movement and sound. Occasionally, I saw the glow of eyes from a dog, cat, or raccoon. In the course of a feeding, I would travel back and forth between these rooms dozens of times. I knew the route instinctively, now running it in the dark: light switch off, total darkness, five steps, feel for open door, close and lock the door, left hand on silo, running half around silo, now slight light from dusk to dawn lamp, jump over auger, 2 steps, under conveyor, enter second feed room, and repeat process again with the addition of jumping two livestock gates for the barnyard. After all four feed rooms were secure, I dark sprinted to the light seeping out from under the milk parlor door where my Dad would be milking cows. No creature from the dark ever attacked me, however a few times in my fearful haste I took too big of a step or too small of a step and ran into a post. Sometimes I did not duck enough and the conveyor would knock me down. Sometimes I slipped on a frost covered auger. The worst was not jumping the gate properly, face planting in the manure. The best was whenever someone was helping me. Then, I felt safe walking back in the dark together. Jesus took on human flesh to walk with all of us through every darkness, through every fear, to the light of abundant life. Do not be afraid is the most common phrase in the Bible.

The family tree of David was believed to be the conduit through which everyone will be blessed. Metaphorically as David's dynasty fell, the tree of David was chopped down leaving a rotting stump. There was fear that God's promised coming glorious kingdom would not come. There was fear that humanity was on its own, that God abandoned us, that chaos, hate, death and fear would overcome us. Isaiah proclaimed, do not be afraid, saying: **Isaiah 11:1-5 NLT “Out of the stump of David's family will grow a shoot—yes, a new Branch bearing fruit from the old root. And the Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. He will delight in obeying the Lord. He will not judge by appearance nor make a decision based on hearsay. He will give justice to the poor and make fair decisions for the exploited. The earth will shake at the force of his word, and one breath from his mouth will destroy the wicked. He will wear righteousness like a belt and truth like an undergarment.”**

People were still afraid. Predators kill prey. Every person hurts others. Life is arduous. Danger, suffer, pain seem to be everywhere. Isaiah proclaimed, do not be afraid, saying: **Isaiah 11:6-10 NLT “In that day the wolf and the lamb will live together; the leopard will lie down with the baby goat. The calf and the yearling will be safe with the lion, and a little child will lead them all. The cow will graze near the bear. The cub and the calf will lie down together. The lion will eat hay like a cow. The baby will play safely near the hole of a cobra. Yes, a little child will put its hand in a nest of deadly snakes without harm. Nothing will hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, for as the waters fill the sea, so the earth will be filled with people who know the Lord. In that day the heir to David's throne will be a banner of salvation to all the world. The nations will rally to him, and the land where he lives will be a glorious place.”**

God brings peace. Prey will be safe from predators. The vulnerable will be protected. All of creation will be filled with the wisdom of God. Where do you see glimpses of this vision coming to life? What actions can we take

today to help bring this prophecy into fruition for the generations that come after us? The prophecy in Isaiah paints a vision of what we work toward when we say “yes to God”: righteousness and equity reign, the wolf lives with the lamb, our abuse will end, the earth will not be destroyed, all people will live in harmony, a child shall lead the way. This is the vision passed down to us: we are invited to pursue it and make it reality today.

When the angel Gabriel comes to Mary, she is perplexed and confused—and no doubt, afraid. And yet, the angel’s news is: “Do not be afraid.” We hear this refrain all throughout the Christmas story, “Do not be afraid. From generation to generation, God shows up in the midst of our fear, uncertainty, and confusion. From generation to generation, people have said, “yes” despite apprehension.

Luke proclaims: **Luke 1:26-38 NLT “In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. Gabriel appeared to her and said, “Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!” Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean. “Don’t be afraid, Mary,” the angel told her, “for you have found favor with God! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!” Mary asked the angel, “But how can this happen? I am a virgin.” The angel replied, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God. What’s more, your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she has conceived a son and is now in her sixth month. For the word of God will never fail.” Mary responded, “I am the Lord’s servant. May everything you have said about me come true.” And then the angel left her.”**

Christine Hong writes: “The story of the annunciation has always held dissonance for me. After all, the angel’s exclamation that Mary should not be afraid is terribly unrealistic. People have been afraid in far less tenuous circumstances. How could Mary not have felt fear when confronted with a celestial being? How could she avoid feeling afraid after hearing the angel’s message about her pregnancy? Later, Mary’s son, Jesus, also felt fear at Gethsemane when faced with betrayal and capital punishment. As she watched him suffer and die, the fear and anguish she must have felt! As a young child, I remember whenever my brother or I were very ill I would hear my mother praying in Korean, “Jeh-gah dae-shin” (“Take me instead”). My mother bargained with God to ease her children’s pain.” Christine continues: “In my time as a chaplain and pastor to parents with sick children, sometimes with life-threatening illnesses, I have heard many parents whisper the same prayer, “Take me instead.” Some theologians try to explain the dissonance between the command to put away fear and what comes later in the story. Yet, what if the dissonance is what we are 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. Perhaps 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. Perhaps the dissonance invites us to accompany people moving through their pain, as Mary and Jesus accompanied one another through life events only the two of them understood. Despite the dissonance, they moved through the liminal and tender space of their lives together. In other words, God moved through the liminal and tender spaces of God’s human life with Mary, even as they were both afraid.”

Mary was afraid, perplexed, disturbed, agitated, and deeply troubled. Mary had personal fears. And Mary had fears for the entire world. Next week we will continue reading from Luke hearing Mary’s hymn of praise declaring God’s liberating love that will fulfill all of God’s promises. Gabriel mentions the throne of her ancestor David, that Jesus will bring the Kingdom of God and Jesus will reign over God’s Kingdom forever. It is safe to assume that Mary had meditated on Isaiah’s fear dispersing prophecy. Mary said “yes” to God to be a person that partners with God in speeding the realization of God’s kingdom for all. Mary got her courage from meditating on scripture, from Gabriel and likely other sources. What gives you courage? What is God inviting you to do? How is God asking you to expand love? How will you say “yes” to God?

Carmelle Beaugelin writes: “In Mary’s “yes,” we see the transformation of a young teenage girl from fearful to determined, from simply accepting to deciding, from passivity to agency, from betrothed to surrogate mother of God—an honor rarer than gold. Perhaps the most remarkable annunciation in this passage is not the messenger’s

revelation to Mary, but Mary's "yes" to the call. What are contemporary examples of "remarkable annunciations"? In the face of fear, when have you been convinced to trust a new calling?

Cole Arthur Riley writes: "I believe fear has the holy potential to draw out awe in us. To lead us into deeper patterns of protection and trust. To mold us into people engaged in the unknown, capable of making mystery of fear instead of terror."

Love Comes Running

a poem by Sarah Speed

I remember the first time I was afraid.

I was a child.

It was a nightmare. (You remember those pesky monsters under the bed.)

I remember minutes felt like hours.

I begged the sun to rise. (Fear always begs the sun to rise.)

Eventually, after minutes that felt like hours, I cried out.

My dad came running.

He sat at the edge of my bed.

He said there is no reason to be afraid.

He checked the closet and the floorboards.

He rearranged my pillows.

He said, "I can stay."

And that's when I learned that when you are afraid, love always comes running.

Love says, "I can stay."

That's what God does for us.

God sits at the edge of the bed.

God checks the closet and the floorboards.

God says, "Be not afraid."

God stays until sunrise.

Love always comes running.

A soldier was concluding patrol on Christmas morning. It had been his custom in other years to attend worship in his home church on Christmas Day, but here in the outlying areas of London, it was not possible. And so, with some of his buddies, the soldier walked down the road that led into the city just as dawn was breaking. Soon the soldiers came upon an old graystone building over whose main entrance were carved the words, "Queen Anne's Orphanage." They decided to knock and see what kind of celebration was taking place inside. In response to their knock, a matron came and explained that the children were war orphans whose parents had been killed in the bombings. The soldiers went inside just as the children were tumbling out of their beds. There was no Christmas tree in the corner and no presents. The soldiers moved around the room, wishing the children a Merry Christmas and giving as gifts whatever they had in their pockets: a stick of chewing gum, a Life Saver, a nickel or a dime, a pencil, a knife, a good luck charm. The soldier noticed a little fellow trembling alone in the corner. He looked a lot like his own nephew back home, so he approached and asked, "And you, little guy, what do you want for Christmas?" The lad replied, "Will you hold me?" The soldier, with tears brimming his eyes, picked up the boy, nestled him in his arms, and held him close.

Emmanuel, God with us. God comes to us. God holds us when we are afraid. God gives us courage to say "yes" to partnering with God in redeeming the world. Amen