

Favor, Fear, Faith
Reading from the Old Testament: Isaiah 2:1-5
Reading from the Gospels: Luke 1:26-38

I have a problem with Gabriel here. Having read the end of the book, I struggle to rid my mind of the image of ol' Gabe giving off the vibe of a sleazy salesman, complete with the tacky sport coat and the overabundance of pomade on the combover. "This is your lucky day! Do not fear!" Seriously? Have you read the rest of the story? At a minimum it's a clear case of false advertising, and Mary probably has grounds for a civil suit.

Just read the evidence. A 13 to 15-year-old teen suddenly finds out she's pregnant. At that age, what's your first thought? *Don't tell my parents.* And how is she going to explain this to Joseph? *So, Joe, about those honeymoon plans...* Like anybody's going to buy the angel story. Then, Matthew says that before the kid is two, they'll be running for their lives to a place of which no Israelite has fond memories. Can't you hear the attendant at the *Flying J* as they are gassing up the minivan? *So, let me get this straight. You're escaping to Egypt? Isn't that sort of backwards for an Israelite?* And surely, Mary won't be thinking this pre-teen of hers is some future king when he gets himself lost on the family road trip to Jerusalem.

And what about that time when most children are starting families, establishing careers, and buying their first house? Mary's son will be homeless, broke, hopelessly unattached, hanging out with his posse, wandering through the villages and towns like a band without a record deal, struggling to pay the loans on their sound equipment. And let's not forget that this child will be under increasing surveillance by Mossad and the Roman CIA because of his supposedly subversive propaganda. And what mom would sign up if she knew the probability that one day she'd be a witness to her child's execution?

Do not fear? You have found favor? Sounds a bit like one of those ads for diet pills, testosterone boosters, or your family of *Flex Seal* products! Satisfaction guaranteed. What does the familiar Christmas ballad ask, *Mary, did you know?*

So, what's this Gabriel up to? Are we talking angel or con man? Divine messenger or cruel jokester? Well, maybe I should give Gabriel a break here. After all, they say it's not good to blame the messenger. Truth is, while every parent has hopes and dreams for their children, no parent has much of a preview of how their child's life will evolve, much less their own. It doesn't

matter if you are Type A or AAA, there's only so much your motivation and overscheduling can do for you or your child. Life happens ... in ways both wondrous and terrifying. It is drama, fantasy, tragedy, and comedy all wrapped up into one. As with a school snow day you can hope for it, plan for it, look for it, but you can't schedule it on your calendar like a dental appointment. Life will come at you without asking if it's a good time for you.

Our agency, though limited, is the willingness to try, to bring our best, and to hope for the perseverance to see how things turn out on the other end. Isn't that what Mary commits to here? Surrendering the illusions of clairvoyance and self-sufficiency, answering the call to serve before knowing what will evolve?

"Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Where does such courage come from to walk toward tomorrow with so little sway over circumstance or environment, peril or aggression? Does Mary assume she'll walk alone? Luke says Mary ponders what sort of angel greeting this may be. So, what is the gist of her pondering?

I think Gabriel's greeting calls for closer examination. "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you ... Do not be afraid ... you have found favor with God." Knowing what we know about the story, it is clear there will be many occasions for fear throughout Mary's journey, but that doesn't mean she need be paralyzed by them.

I'm not sure fearlessness is ever a possibility, and I'm not sure such a characteristic is laudable, particularly if it stems from an arrogance of invulnerability or a disregard for consequence. The question here is not whether Mary will face fearful things, rather the question is what resource Mary will have to face her fears. Think about it, when Gabriel says, "Do not be afraid, Mary," isn't he acknowledging the fear he already sees in her? Gabriel isn't telling Mary that her fear is irrational or that there is nothing of which to be afraid. In fact, Gabriel is there to inform Mary of the resources she has been given that will provide the strength, wisdom, and courage to travel through a fearful world.

"Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." This is no trivial greeting. There is no facile sentiment in these words. In fact, these words reveal the very heart of the gospel, the central intention of God's purposes.

God's favor. God's presence. The word translated as *favor* here is so important that Gabriel says it twice. In the original Greek, it is a form of the root word *xaris*, which is the same word we translate as *grace*, the unmerited, free gift of God's acceptance, God's redemption, and God's unquenchable, unceasing, all-embracing love.

Certainly, God knows what fearful things God is calling Mary to face. Certainly God comprehends the suspicions, the questions, the judgements, the casual cruelties, and the heart-piercing traumas Mary will face. So, before anything, God's intent is for Mary to understand that she is accepted, embraced, affirmed, and loved; that she has value, significance, and purpose in God's eyes. God needs Mary to know these things up front, for through her calling, she will carry this gift of God for the whole world. "For God so loved the world..." That's how John describes it. "God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him." Or as Paul phrases it, "Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand."

Can't you hear God giving the angel his marching orders. *Okay Gabe, you've got one job. This is no small thing I'm asking Mary to do. So you have to help her understand that this calling is coming from the top. She has to know that she has my seal of approval; she has to know she has my confidence, my vote, my trust, my love, and along with all that, she'll have my presence. I will go with her.*

“Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” To be accepted ... to be affirmed ... to have the knowledge we are trusted ... to know we will not go alone; isn't that our deepest desire, our most profound need? Isn't that what can calm our fears in a fearful world? The spouse holding your hand in those last moments before major surgery; the friend who drops everything to be present with you when tragedy strikes; the faith community that accepts you when you are struggling to accept yourself; the God who embraces you even as others only see you as a fool.

Gabriel isn't saying our fears are irrational. Gabriel is reminding us that in a fearful world, we have God's acceptance, we have God's unfailing love, and we have God's presence for the journey forward. Gabriel isn't saying there isn't anything to be afraid of. Gabriel is highlighting that we

will not face our fears alone, and we need not face our fears without the resources of the living God.

Just as the lives of our parents and grandparents are marked by the Depression years or the War years, so too, the timeline of our lives will contain that set of parentheses marking the lost years of the pandemic. To this day, we are regularly surprised by previously common encounters and events that now greet us with the shocking realization that we haven't experienced them since 2019: the friend, acquaintance, relative, church member we have not encountered for three years; the white noise of a busy office; the favorite restaurant we haven't frequented; the tradition that disappeared for three years; the family reunions, crowded venues, sporting events we can't believe we are just now returning to.

2020 will be remembered like no other year for us. I read this week that recent research suggests that the brains of teenagers who lived through the pandemic show signs of premature aging. MRIs of representative groups spanning a period before the pandemic (Nov. 2016 - Nov. 2019) were compared to MRIs of another representative group spanning a period during the pandemic but after the major lockdowns were lifted (Oct. 2020 - March

2022). Researchers discovered that “physical changes in the brain that occurred during adolescence – such as thinning of the cortex and growth of the hippocampus and the amygdala – were greater in the post-lockdown group than in the pre-pandemic group, suggesting such processes had sped up. In other words, their brains had aged faster.”

Ian Gotlib, an author of the study, said, “Brain age difference was about three years – we hadn’t expected that large an increase given that the lockdown was less than a year [long].” (Nicola Davis, *The Guardian*) The research indicated that the stress of the pandemic was both a significant factor behind the changes in the brain while also being a factor in the deterioration of mental health among teens. 2020 was a strange and stressful year in so many ways. I don’t hear as much talk about a *new normal* any more. Could it be that the exhaustion and destabilization wrought during the pandemic have led us to the conclusion that *normal* is a myth? I don’t know.

I read something else this week that also gives us something to ponder as we consider Gabriel’s greeting to Mary, the life to which she is being called, and the life to which she will give birth. Among the more popular of

online Bible resources is the YouVersion Bible App. During that haunted year of 2020, the YouVersion Bible App saw searches increase by 80% totaling nearly 600,000 million. Guess what ranked as the most searched, read, and bookmarked Bible verse across the globe? Isaiah 41:10 - “Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.” Isn’t that the same message Gabriel is sent to impress upon Mary? Let’s compare, shall we? (Kate Shellnutt, *Christianity Today*)

Through the prophet, the Lord says, “I am your God” – Through the angel, the Lord says, “You have found favor with God.” To be known and claimed by God – Grace.

Through the prophet, the Lord says, “Do not fear, for I am with you” – Through the angel, the Lord says, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” To know you are not alone – Presence. Just on a human level, I can tell you this introvert can face many things I could not possibly face, were it not for that one person who goes with me. So, think about what God is saying and doing here. The child Mary will bear is God’s promise that there is nowhere you can go, there is nothing you can face, that God won’t go and

face with you. As Frederick Buechner famously said, the grace of God means something like: "Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are, because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you I created the universe. I love you." (Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*)

Mary received the gift from the angel's lips, and that gift provided Mary the strength and bravery to answer the call. "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." It's not that we have nothing to fear. It's that we have a living and present Lord with whom we find the strength and light to face the fears that will intrude upon our lives and interrupt our plans. You have found favor with God. God will go with you.

Oh, by the way, the angel Gabriel doesn't leave without offering this footnote: "Nothing will be impossible with God." Amen.