

“From Generation to Generation: God Meets us in our fear”
Luke 1:26-38

How do we deal with our fears? All of us have fears; some small, while others are overwhelmingly big. Some fears are about little aversions or our natural instincts for survival, such as our fear of heights, physical pain, or getting lost. Other fears are emotional fears such as loss, failure, vulnerability, lack of control, or shame. Even if we are not afraid at the moment, it does not take much for fear to grip our hearts. Politicians know this very well and they often manage to find ways to control us by stoking the fires of our fears. Sometimes brutality and violence are employed to keep people in place. We have seen this through the years in Iran. There is a longing among the people for social and political freedom which we see when it rises up in protests. Yet, every time the response of the government is so brutal that people eventually give up. Sometimes the fears that are employed are emotional such as our need for safety, health, or survival. Fears that are not acknowledged and properly dealt with often run our lives.

So how do we deal with our fears which are part of our human experience? We know what does not work:

- Banishing or denying our fears because that only drives them into our subconscious
- Succumbing to them because that deprives us of living full and meaningful lives
- Running away from our fears because that is impossible
- Spreading them to others because that increases our fears

Today we are invited to look at how our ancestors in faith learned to deal with fear. In our Bible story for this week, we hear about Mary and how she dealt with her fear. Mary lived in a time of great fear for her people as they suffered under the rule of the Romans. There were several uprisings that were brutally put down by the Romans. She was a young woman, most likely a teenager, from a common background. But because of her faith, she received a special invitation from God to be an agent of God’s grace in the world, but the invitation involved great risk to her life. Let’s listen to Luke 1:26-38.

²⁶In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.³²He 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. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” ³⁴Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” ³⁵The 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. ³⁶And 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. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God.” ³⁸Then 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.

Notice the movement in Mary’s heart from fear and confusion to faith and courage. When the angel first appeared to her, she was confused and did not know what to think of his greeting. And so the angel said the words which often accompany human and divine encounters: “Do not be afraid” and the reason for that is that she has “found favor with God.” Mary’s fear is legitimate as the stakes are really high and there is no promise of no pain. But then the words about the son that she was going to bear must have raised more worries for Mary. The way Gabriel described the baby is that of “son of the highest” who would ascend David’s throne, was a strong hope for the people. This statement draws directly on the language of II Samuel 7:11-16 and Psalm 89. Gabriel presented Jesus to Mary as the fulfillment of Yahweh’s promise to David to create an everlasting dynasty. We often spiritualize these hopes and think of personal salvation coming to us through Jesus. We reduce the story to something that Mary did because she had personal faith in God. The reality of it is that Mary acted according to God’s desire for a whole people to be liberated. The young woman, Mary, receives news that she is to play an important role in God’s purpose for the world. The angel Gabriel tells Mary what Jesus’ life will mean for God’s people: Jesus will be a great ruler, like King David; Jesus’ reign will last forever; Jesus will be known as God’s child. So, when Mary accepted this role of being the mother of Jesus, she accepted the call to help her people. Her action was even more radical than we think. We often think of her pregnancy bringing shame to her family because she was not married yet. But the bigger risk in this story is that Mary was acting to help save her people, which would have exposed her to the wrath and brutality of the Empire. Imagine a young teenage girl risking her life by believing in a vision!

Her courage came from her prayer life. The answer to the normal fears she was experiencing came when she leaned into God’s grace that was with her. She was not going to face her challenges alone. She prayed her way through her fear. She asked questions and shared her confusion, but then she listened deeply to the answers and that changed everything. Legend has it that many women were asked before Mary, but she was the first to say yes! It is because Mary knew that the only way through fear is God’s grace.

This is such a hard part of the journey of faith. We want to trust, but our fears often get the better of us. The example of Mary gives us a way through our fears. In her vulnerability and willingness to trust in God’s grace, Mary found a courageous way through a huge risk. Her story reminds us that God’s grace and presence are the sure constants we have in our lives to lean on. What we can offer our children and the generations to come is teaching them to find their way through fear. Here is a piece by Berne Brown that gets to the heart of this lesson of faith: <https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/grace-and-fear>

This is the wisdom of faith we have inherited and which we are invited to share with the generations to come. In her book *The Wild Land Within*, Lisa Colón DeLay writes, “We don’t have to hunt fear with a pitchfork. Fear has something to say. Our fears offer us an

invitation to engage with the discomfort of the inner places. Will you give your fear a chance to speak to you?

When you realize that you are afraid or not doing well, sit down with your fear and have a conversation. Here are three ways to converse with fear: First, when you feel or notice discomfort, pause. Stay paused until you know more. Second, acknowledge what is happening in the moment. Be honest: 'This feels bad—negative. What do I feel? Maybe it is fear, but I'm also angry. What else? I feel overlooked.' Third, dig a bit deeper. Ask, what is this trying to show me? or What else might be going on? Give yourself some time and delve into the fear: "I'm not sure why I'm angry. Now, thinking about it more, it wasn't such a good day. Three things happened today that made me feel frustrated, inferior, and like I wasn't being taken seriously."

With full awareness of what we are dealing with, we are invited to bring our fears and our hearts into the presence of God so that God's grace can help us to find our way forward. Think of how much suffering would be eliminated in our world if we learned and taught our children how to fear while leaning on grace. Instead of denying our fears or inflicting them on others, we would find wholeheartedness and peace, even in the worst of times. Inspired by Lisa Colón Delay, we are invited to a brief time of prayer. Take a deep breath and allow your spirit to settle into this time of prayer. Listen to these words as an invitation from Christ to you to bring your fears to him:

Come sit with me oh vigilant one
Tell me where you see danger and why
I hear you anxious one
Will you take my hand
Let's sit together with Love. Amen.