

January 7, 2024
Luke 2: 21-35
First Presbyterian Church, Lebanon
Stacy Rector

Christmas Through the Eyes of Mary: Pierced

I once read somewhere that the term “Do not be afraid” appears 365 times in Scripture. That means one “Do not be afraid” for every day of the week. Though I really wish this were true, it isn’t. The term makes more like 70 appearances in the Bible, which is still quite a few and speaks to how often we human beings need to be reminded that fear is optional.

As we conclude this series, *Christmas Through the Eyes of Mary*, I wonder how often Mary recites the words “do not be afraid” to herself, the words that the angel Gabriel speaks to her when she is called to become Jesus’ mother.

Though, it is curious to me that Luke does not say in the text that Mary is afraid when the angel greets her. Luke reports that she is perplexed. She is young, a teenager, but Mary strikes me as someone who is not easily intimidated. Perhaps that is one of the reasons that God chooses her in the first place.

Her famous words in the first chapter of Luke’s gospel, referred to as the Magnificat, are bold, even in your face, as she praises Yahweh. Through her praise, she affirms her faith that the God of Israel is working to upend the status quo, to scatter the proud, to bring down the powerful, to lift up the lowly, to fill the bellies of the hungry and send the rich away empty, to make good on God’s promises, no matter how long it takes. Mary is no shrinking violet.

Perhaps Gabriel misreads Mary’s confusion as fear. Or maybe Gabriel is not speaking just to the moment of angelic encounter with his “do not be afraid” message but to so many other moments to come for this young mother-to-be. After all, in addition to upending the status quo, the Holy Spirit upends this young girl’s life. And no matter how much faith Mary has, even if she is not afraid now, she will soon have every reason to be.

Perhaps it is naivete, her youth, her faith, her personality, or some combination of all of these that leads her to say, “Let it be,” to the angel. And thus, begins a journey where, I suspect, fear will become her companion.

We meet Mary today traveling to the temple in Jerusalem, along with Joseph, for Jesus to be circumcised as required by Jewish law. As devout Jews, she and Joseph also bring their sacrifice as is required as well, though they are unable to offer the

lamb and pigeon that is called for. In cases of hardship, the law permits the offering of two doves or two pigeons. Mary and Joseph can only afford the birds.

Also, according to the law of Moses, at the firstborn son's dedication to God, the baby can be redeemed for five shekels. Luke doesn't mention that the family redeems Jesus from his status as belonging to God, which makes sense both as a matter of finances and as a matter of the angel's visit. Luke makes clear with this reference that Jesus follows in the footsteps of the Jewish prophets of old like Samuel, whose own mother Hannah in her barrenness, prays to God for a son, and after giving birth to Samuel, weans him, and sends him to live in the temple with the priest, Eli, in thanksgiving for what God has done for her.

Luke wants to make sure that readers and hearers understand, though Jesus will debate and clash with the rabbis, the Pharisees, and Sadducees, they all belong to the same faith tradition. Jesus engages with them as an insider to the Jewish faith. Remember Jesus is Jewish, not Christian, and is steeped in the law and tradition. His love for and his immersion in the law of Moses is the only way he is able to later critique how the law can be misused to restrict instead of to free. Jesus says that he comes to fulfill the law, not to abolish it.

But for now, as the infant Jesus is presented by his parents in the temple, a devout old man named Simeon, is led by the Spirit to where Jesus is. Simeon has been promised by God that he will not die until he seen God's Messiah. Simeon enters the place where Mary and Joseph are, takes their baby into his arms, and praises God that he can now die in peace for God has allowed him to see, "God's salvation...a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to the people of Israel."

What an incredible scene. I can almost hear Elton John singing the Circle of Life in the background! An old man's prayer is answered before he dies, as he holds this baby, God made flesh, the hope of Israel, the hope of the world, this humble child who will share his life with the poor and the vulnerable, who will preach the coming of God's beloved community where all are welcome, fed, housed, forgiven, and live together in peace. This scene represents a promise fulfilled, hope for the future, light in the darkness, an inspiring story for us today as we enter this new year.

Simeon blesses the young couple too and then looks straight at Mary. No more do we hear Sir Elton singing in the background. The music becomes more foreboding, a minor key. Simeon's tone is hushed. The sparkle in his eye becomes weepy, "This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

A sword will pierce your own soul too. No mother ever wants to hear words like that as she holds her newborn baby. No words could be any more fear-inducing to a

mother than words that point to the death of her child. I myself cannot imagine any more soul piercing experience. Some of you here today know that very piercing as you have experienced it yourselves. Mary is your sister, a companion in your pain.

Honestly, I doubt that Simeon is telling Mary anything that she doesn't already suspect. Remember her words from the Magnificat. When you start talking about bringing down the powerful and sending the rich away empty, the powerful and rich don't tend to react well. Mary cannot be sure of just what will be asked of her son, and by extension of her, as he embodies a love that knows no bounds, has no conditions, keeps no score, in a world that too often can't stomach that kind of love. I can imagine that with Simeon's words, among all the other things that Mary has been pondering in her heart, fear is now setting up shop there as well.

But Mary persists. She goes on. She not only loves and nurtures her son but teaches him through her words and her example how to be kind, how to forgive, how to serve, how to speak the truth, how to pray, how to hope, how to say "yes" to God's call, even when it will cost more than she imagines that she can bear.

There is an amazing song by Patty Griffin, called "Mary." If you haven't ever heard it, I would recommend it. One of the best lines of the song says, *"But Jesus says Mother I couldn't stay another day longer. As he flies right by and leaves a kiss upon her face, While the angels are singing his praises in a blaze of glory, Mary stays behind and starts cleaning up the place."*

Mary stays behind and starts cleaning up the place. All the mothers here can relate I suspect. Mary fades into the background of Jesus' story, but without her, there is no story. As the writer and minister Frederick Beuchner writes of God's incarnation in Jesus, *"Whatever the story of Jesus may be to the high angels, to us it must, like any other story, involve a beginning. The place where the story begins is a place. The time when it begins is a time. The person it begins with is a girl."*

As we end the Christmas season and enter a new year, we celebrate that through the Christ child, the seeming gap between God and everything else has been overcome. Jesus in his person demonstrates God's radical solidarity with humanity assuring us that we are never alone. Our God is truly with us, for us, in us, and among us. Indeed, this is extraordinarily good news, and at the same time...

We must also remember what Mary already knows, what my theology professor Shirley Guthrie writes, *"that Christmas is the story of a radical invasion of God into the kind of real world where we live all year long—a world where there is political unrest and injustice, poverty, hatred, jealousy, and both the fear and the longing that things could be different. It's the same darkness as ours into which the light shines, it is the same flesh as ours into which Jesus is born. And it didn't only*

happen in Christmas plays and in sermons, (in other words, inside the church) it also happened outside the church and in the world.”

Christmas is a radical invasion into the real world, and there are real life costs when we proclaim and live into this invasion, into God’s way, into the way of the Beloved Community. Matthew’s gospel tells us that King Herod does not perceive of the birth of Jesus as good news, but as a threat. And rightfully so. Remember the Magnificat. Too often, when the powerful perceive a threat to their power, when they become afraid, things get ugly. Things get violent. Jesus’ birth is no exception. Herod calls for the slaughter of all the children in and around Bethlehem under the age of two while Jesus and his parents become homeless refugees fleeing to Egypt to escape the wrath of this megalomaniac. Not much has changed, and yet because of Jesus’ birth, everything has changed.

Though we still see the folly of human fear and insecurity played out every day. We watch as those with power employ violence to maintain their position. We grow numb to the ways that the truth is sacrificed and the most vulnerable are scapegoated. Innocents suffer as violence become the first resort for righting a perceived or actual wrong and punishment is more pervasive than mercy.

And mothers like Mary lay down their own lives for their children every day in our world. As bombs fall in Gaza, Palestinian mothers cradle their children, covering them with their bodies, and are buried with them as buildings collapse. Jewish mothers hold tight to their children as they are herded into vans at gunpoint to face torture and torment; mothers walk across deserts with babies on their backs; hold the hands of the their little ones as they climb into overcrowded rafts; take buses for lonely miles to visit their children shackled behind prison walls; work two jobs to feed their kids and still need to visit the food pantry; sit for hours at the bedsides of sick children; take the blows of an angry man to spare their little one the brunt of the rage.

As she stands at the foot of the cross, watching her child die as a criminal, executed by the state, as Jesus cries out to God in his forsakenness, Mary’s own soul is bloodied and bruised and yes, pierced, with his every gasp for breath, just as Simeon foretold all those years ago.

Where is God then? Where is God now? God is there, friends. This is what incarnation means. God is there gasping on the cross, lying in the hospital bed, sitting in a prison cell, exhausted in the desert, buried in the rubble.

In this moment of despair, even as she can’t imagine living another day without her son, the words of Gabriel rise up through the pain. “Don’t be afraid, Mary. The Lord is with you.” The same words of which Jesus will remind us throughout his ministry. Don’t be afraid, sisters and brothers. The Lord is with us. Fear is optional.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it. We belong to God, just like Mary, just like Jesus, and we are free to live our lives as God's own, serving as Jesus served, forgiving as he forgave, feeding, welcoming, restoring, reconciling, and loving even as he loved...a love that casts out all fear. This is our calling too. Thanks be to God.