25.12.14 “Even in our Fear, We are Called Forward”- Rev. Adam Hange

Introduction:

Today’s scriptures draw us into the quiet, steady courage that makes God’s future possible. Mary—young, vulnerable, and living under the shadow of empire—meets an unexpected message with a trembling but courageous yes. And Jeremiah receives a call he feels unprepared to bear, yet God assures him: “Do not be afraid, for I am with you.” These stories remind us that God’s hope often begins in small, hidden places, through people who choose trust over fear. As we listen, may we discover our own quiet acts of courage waiting to be born.

Witness of Ancient Wisdom Luke 1:26-39, NRSVUE

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

Jeremiah 1:4-10, NRSVUE

Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, *"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."* Then I said, *"Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy."* But the Lord said to me, *"Do not say, 'I am only a boy,' for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord."* Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth, and the Lord said to me, *"Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."*

Witness of Modern Wisdom "The First Step" by Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed

Watch any parent. It starts with the first step. They kneel down. They smile with anticipation. They reach for their baby, calling and cooing them forward. And then before they know it, they're running behind a bike. They're yelling, "Keep pedaling! You got it! I'm right here!" And they're jumping up and down, because that little red helmet passed the mailbox. And then, just like that, they're driving circles in the church parking lot. They're giving instructions about easing on and off the pedal. They're having conversations about curfew and heartbreak. And then, before they know it, they're standing in a hospital room. Their heart is bursting. And they say, "Put her head right here. Rock her gently. Do you remember the nursery rhymes? You were born for this." The first step is always the hardest, but you, beloved, were born for this.

Sermon "Even in our Fear, We are Called Forward" Rev. Adam Hange

Opening Prayer

Let us pray! Holy One, the story of this season is not a new one. We've heard this tale before. We've seen the nativities, watched the plays, sung the songs, witnessed the children act it out. The story of this season is not a new one, and yet we long to hear it as if it is. So spark our spirits awake. Call forth awareness, attention, and reverence in us. Allow us to hear this ancient tale with brand new ears. With hope we pray, amen.

I. Opening: Naming That We Are… Uh… Kinda Freaking Out

"Friends, I don't know if you've noticed, but the world is doing that wobbly, spinning thing again.

Like a too-tall stack of chairs, that could topple over at any moment.

These days, Fear has a lot of places to land.

Fear of over the erosion of civil rights. Fear of job insecurity. Fear of whether we'll be able to make rent or keep up with rising costs.

Some of us fear the really big things— climate change, the future of our democracy, the spread of global conflict.

Others fear smaller, quieter things, like our calendars, to-do lists, and email inboxes.

And some of us are scared, *we simply won't be enough*.

That when "the moment comes" we won't be ready to meet it.

(Which, honestly, is *kind of* my specialty.)

And into that, right into the messy cocktail of fears, Advent III wanders in like a toddler in footie pajamas saying, ***'Fear not!'***

Which is, frankly, both adorable… *and slightly annoying.*

II. Mary: Patron Saint of Freaking Out but Showing Up Anyway

This morning, we read two stories of young people, who faced their fear - and found the courage to step forward into God's call….

Just picture it… young Mary is there, minding her own business, probably planning her wedding Pinterest board — pottery, olives, rustic-chic Nazareth

aesthetic — when an angel of the Lord shows up *like the world's most dramatic party crasher.*

Luke tells us Mary is "much perplexed."

Bible-speak for: *"What fresh nonsense is this?"*

Gabriel says: "Do not be afraid." Which, in angel code, translates roughly to:

"You are absolutely going to want to be afraid right now."

I don't know how much time transpired between this heavenly visit and her next next word…

But in the end, the young Mary's response is…

"Let it be with me according to your word."

Here's the thing… Mary isn't fearless. I don't believe that. I do believe she is *brave* — hers is the courage of a "trembling yes."

She moves forward despite uncertainty, danger, and embarrassment — before immediately running off to her cousin Elizabeth's house for a little extra support.

III. Jeremiah: Patron Saint of 'I Am Only…'

For another youthful example of facing one's fears… we read the call story of Jeremiah, the weeping prophet.

Poor Jeremiah, gets the prophet job before he's old enough to vote.

He protests: "I am only a boy."

The Biblical equivalent of: ***"I think you dialed the wrong number."***

God responds: "Zip it with the self-doubt, kid…. I'm coming with you."

His fear does not disqualify Jeremiah.

Rather, his Fear locates him… exactly where God wants to begin.

Don't be fooled! Jeremiah and Mary are not spiritual superheroes.

In fact, I believe, what they really are is a couple of anxious introverts,

drafted into God's big, ridiculous project to Love and mend the world.

IV. Connecting Their Fear to Ours

Now, I've seen some of you this week.

Some of you are carrying Fear, like a heavy backpack full of bowling balls.

Some of you wake up at 3 a.m. doing anxiety algebra:

" Supreme Court decision, plus disappointing midterms, divided by my savings—carry the one, subtract my passport expiration…"

Given our nightly parade of fears and anxieties, it's a wonder any of us are sleeping!

Lucky for us, God doesn't wait for the world to calm down before showing up.

If God waited for us to be fearless, we'd still be wandering the wilderness asking Moses *if we're there yet.*

So if you're scared, welcome. You're in excellent company. *Indeed, you're basically an honorary prophet.*

V. Advent Joy: Not Cheerfulness, Not Denial — Holy Defiance

And amidst all this, we're here to light the candle for Joy this morning… Joy!

Let's be honest: joy often gets confused with mere cheerfulness.

Cheerfulness is the lady at the store saying, "*Have a holly, jolly Christmas!"*

Deep Joy, is Mary saying "yes" when everything inside her was probably screaming, what-the-actual-heck!

True, Advent Joy is not happy-clappy denial - but holy defiance! .

Joy is choosing to believe that God is up to something, even when the forces of Empire are breathing down your neck.

This kind of joy, takes some holy chutzpah!

People will say all kinds of things about Courage.

Someone once said that "courage is fear that has said its prayers."[3]

It's a memorable turn of phrase… but I think there's a little more to it.

I often think about something Frederick Buechner once wrote. He said:

***"Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid."*[1]**

The truthg is, the world doesn't become less beautiful or less terrible

just because we pray,

or because an angel shows up in our living room,

or because God asks something absurd of us.

The point isn't that fear *goes away.*

The point is that fear doesn't get the last word.

I would argue that Courage is simply fear … that decided to ***show up anyway*** —

fear that said, "Fine. Let's do this. But I'm bringing …snacks and a friend."

VI. Your Church: A Community Called Forward (Even When Trembling)

Friends, let me tell you something about yourselves…

You are a church that does brave things, things some might be too afraid to do.

You shelter people.

You feed people.

You welcome people others might rather erase.

You show up for justice, like you actually believe the Gospel *means something!*

Do you know how rare that is?

I've seen churches split over the color of the carpet, clapping during a baptism, or switching to gluten-free communion bread.

But you…

You keep taking first steps. You keep doing the next faithful thing — wobbly like a kid learning to walk — and God keeps running alongside you cheering,

“Keep going! I’m right here!”

Courage doesn’t mean we’re not scared. It means that ***fear is not the boss of us[2].***

VII. The Poem: ‘The First Step’ and God’s Coaching Voice

Sarah Are’s poem reminds us of God as the world’s most patient caretaker:

Kneeling down at our level, arms wide, saying: “Come on, sweetie. Just one step. I promise I won’t let go.”[4]

Sometimes that step is standing up to Empire. Boldly shining the light on the abuse of power.

Sometimes it’s sending a card or making a casserole. Truth be told, there are casseroles that have changed more lives than any sermon ever will.

You were born for this moment — not because you’re fearless, but because God is with you… with us… with all who are anxious or afraid.

VIII. Closing: God’s On-the-Ground Presence in Our Fear

So, if you are a little scared today — welcome! You’re not broken. You’re human.

Like Mary, like Jeremiah, like 98% of people who have ever tried to follow God — fear is your traveling companion, not your jailer.

God whispers over fear:

- *Do not be afraid.*
- *I am with you.*
- *You were born for this.*
- *Now go on — take that next faithful step*
- *Speak God’s truth and proclaim Good News!*

Closing

Go now, beloved, with trembling knees and hearts wide open.

Step forward, even if it's awkward.

Fear may tag along, but God is carrying you.

Take love, take courage, *take snacks* — and keep moving,

one wobbly step at a time.

Amen.

Footnotes / References

1. Frederick Buechner, *Beyond Words* (New York: HarperOne, 2004), 45.

2. Pema Chödrön, *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times* (Shambhala, 1997), 10.

3. Ambrose Redmoon (James Neil Hollingworth), *No Peaceful Warriors!*, *Gnosis Magazine*, Issue 16, 1990.

4. Rev. Sarah Are, *"The First Step"*, 2020, www.rev-sarah-are.com/poems.