

## December 4th, 2022 - Luke 1:26-38 - Emma Thackston

About 2 and a half years ago, I was in Spokane, living with my parents and three of my siblings, finishing up college, online. It was the very beginning of the pandemic, during the stay at home order. I was in communication with Dan during this time - my college professor and mentor was familiar with Dan, and had helped craft the residency position here that I would eventually occupy.

What most of you probably don't know is that I almost didn't make it here: I withdrew my application for this position right before we would have set up an interview time. I sent an email to Dan telling him that I no longer wanted to be considered for this position, and that was that.

At first, it felt good to say no. It felt safe, to choose to remain in the comfortable bubble I had created for myself. It was fear that kept me from moving forward with the process. I was scared of all the change it would bring. I was scared of working full-time in ministry, of speaking in front of people, of having responsibility over a ministry. I was scared to leave my family. I was scared to leave the place that was so familiar and move to a place where nothing was familiar, where I knew no one. I didn't want to say yes - not because I had a bad feeling about this place and its people; I didn't - but because it meant stepping out in faith, not knowing where it would take me.

Months went by. But even though there was a sense of comfort in saying no, during these months I kept feeling like I had made the choice to dismiss God's call to me. Something was prompting me to revisit my decision and see about making a different choice.

This morning, we are going to be hearing about an ordinary woman who had a decision to make, too... This is the story of Mary, the mother of Jesus. How will Mary respond to God's call to her?

Let's listen to the story of Mary from the Word of God in Luke chapter 1, starting at v. 26:

"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."

This is the Word of the Lord. *Thanks be to God.* Let's pray.

God of all hope and joy, open our hearts in welcome to Your love, to Your presence, to Your peace. May we be humble recipients of Your Word this morning as we wait with quiet expectation for the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ, our God with us. Amen.

This story is beautifully significant for many reasons. In the book of Luke, women only speak 15 times. Matthew's gospel chooses to focus on Joseph, but Luke has chosen to highlight Mary's story. In May, I got to be in Israel for two weeks on a pilgrimage with some of my closest friends. And one of the places we got to go was the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth. The church stands over the cave that tradition holds to be the home of Mary. Before going into the church, we gathered in a circle to read, reflect on and pray through Mary's story. It was so special to be there and to imagine what this all might have been like for Mary.

Mary was an ordinary woman - a girl, really; she was probably only 13 or 14 years old. She would have been expected to get married very young, have lots of children and tend to all the household duties. In those times, there wasn't really another life path for young girls like her - so, in a large sense, Mary would have had a pretty good idea of what her life was going to look like. Until this happens.

When the angel suddenly appears, Mary is understandably baffled. It's possible that Mary knows that the angel has come to bring dramatic news. Even if she doesn't realize what's about to happen, I bet the angel's sudden presence alone was enough to bring about fear in Mary's heart. I know I would be scared and surprised if an angel suddenly appeared in front of me.

We have the advantage of knowing what the angel is going to say to Mary... and we know that ultimately, it is good news. But Mary would have had no idea what was about to happen; that she was about to hear words that would change the entire course of all of humanity.

There isn't an easy explanation as to why Mary was chosen by God. Henri Nouwen says that "people are chosen - not because they are loved more than others, but because God has plans for them that involve the salvation and inclusion of others." So here is Mary, an ordinary person,

chosen by God to hear the words that will change not only her life, but the entire course of all of humanity.

But even before saying the words that would change everything, the angel prepares Mary by grounding her to these two truths. The first is the truth of God's love for her: "Greetings, favored one!" The second is the truth of God's peace-giving presence: "The Lord is with you.... Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God."

These are God's promises to us:  
that God loves us, and that God is always with us, giving us peace.

Mary was favored by God. It's an interesting term, favored; it makes me think of my 4 siblings and me in our childhood years, each of us competing for the spot of the "favorite" kid. But instead of reading it in a way that conveys competition or favoritism, I like to think that the angel's words express God's deep and real love for Mary, for just being *her*. It's as if God is saying to Mary, "You are important to me. I love you. There is something special about you."

How many of us long to hear these words from someone and know that they mean them?  
Especially in these long, dark days, I find myself eager to remind my people,  
"Don't forget about me - I'm still here. Do you still see me? Do you still love me?"

I grew up hearing all the time that God loves me. I heard it in Sunday School and Children's Church. I heard it at Vacation Bible School and youth group. I heard it in the songs on the repetitive and probably very annoying CDs in our minivan growing up. But in all its retelling, it can become dull - I find myself tuning it out.

While preparing for this sermon, the angel's words of God's favor hit me in a new way. God's love has been so evident to me these past couple of years, and reading words of favor reminded me to look back in gratitude for how the love of God has infiltrated so much of my life.

When I first moved here, I didn't know anyone, and nobody knew me. It was an isolating experience to not be known. As time went on and my community began to grow, I knew I had to make a decision: was I going to be vulnerable, knowing that vulnerability leads to connection? Or was I going to limit how much of myself I would share and remain at an arm's length from people?

Vulnerability is *scary* and it's *risky*. It's scary to open yourself up to someone and wonder if they'll stick around after hearing about *all* of you - the good and the bad, the dark places inside your heart that don't get shared with just anyone.

I longed for deeper connections, so I decided to open up. And even though it has been sometimes terrifying, it has largely been so rewarding. Because my people here have listened to me. They have listened, and they haven't run away. And they've affirmed my Belovedness. Again and again, my friends have reminded me of their love for me... and I like to think that all real love on earth is a reflection of God's love for us. We love because He first loved us.

Hear the angel's words again: "Greetings, favored one..."  
What's it like for you to hear that you are important to God? That God loves you?  
That God sees something special in you?

When I *really* believe this... my love for others is so much more deep and authentic. When I am sure about who I am in God, I am more able to faithfully respond to God's call, even when it leads me into uncharted territory.

I imagine that Mary was comforted by the reminder of God's love for her, and especially that it was said in such a direct and personal way... the angel calls Mary by name, as his greeting continues:

*"The Lord is with you. Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God."*

The angel's words here were probably said to comfort and assure Mary, whose face may have been showing the fear that I know I would have been feeling in that moment.

Thinking of Mary's situation and the angel's words, the verse in Joshua 1 came to mind, where the Lord speaks these words to Joshua as He sends him on a risky journey: "I command you: be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."

The first time I lived alone was here in Missoula. And I was terrified. I was scared to fall asleep, to not know what would happen in the night. I was scared to return home in the dark. I had never felt this level of fear in my life. And I know it sounds silly... it felt silly to me, to be so scared when I was really in a safe spot. Fear can be so irrational.

Late one night as I lay in my bed, frozen with fear, I heard some noises right outside my window. You're probably thinking, it's Missoula! There are deer and bears and all kinds of creatures out there. But of course, I was in a different headspace, and I really thought this was the end.

I decided that the only way I would be able to sleep was by identifying the source of the noise, even if it meant facing my death. Tentatively, I opened the blinds and shined my phone flashlight out there. A few pairs of eyes reflected back at me. It was a family of raccoons, getting into who-

knows-what kind of trouble. Most of you probably wouldn't like to see a raccoon around your house - I get that. But I was so relieved to see these mischievous creatures - it made me laugh. In that moment, I felt like God had sent them to remind me of His levity and peaceful presence.

In her book *Prayer in the Night*, Tish Harrison Warren writes that God doesn't promise to keep bad things from happening to us. I know, I don't like to hear that, either. But that's not the promise. It was a group of cute raccoons outside my window that time, but it could've been something worse.

God's promise *isn't* protection from the bad things that happen here on earth. When we say "yes" to following God, we don't get an automatic bubble of protection around us and everyone we love. That'd be nice, but that's just not how it works.

God's promise *is* this: God promises to be with us in everything, giving us access to His peace.

Mary was about to be asked to embark on a journey that would require God to be with her. I find it so lovely that our God is one who cares to give us comfort and peace in the midst of the adventures we're sent on. God could remain distant, assigning things to us and not caring about our well-being. But that's not our God. Our God loves us enough to tell us that we do not have to be afraid, because He is always with us.

Over time, I began to be more aware of God's presence and peace. My fear wasn't magically eliminated, and the chances of something bad happening weren't lowered. But I felt such a strong sense of comfort and solidarity, knowing that God wasn't going to leave me alone in the night, in my fear.

I invite you to consider your own dark places of darkness, of doubt, of fear and vulnerability.

Can you trust that God promises to not leave you alone?

Can you trust that God will remain close to you in those spaces?

After a few months of living at home during the early days of the pandemic, I came to terms with the fact that the nagging inside of me would not go away - the one that was telling me to revisit my decision to say "no" to this position. I knew I needed to do something about it. So I thought, "I'll just email Dan and see if there's any chance the position is still open. It's been a few months... surely, they've filled it; then I can move on with my life and know that God doesn't want me in Missoula." So I crafted an email late one night and saved it in my drafts; I was going to send it the next morning. But when I woke up and went to send it, there in my inbox was an email from Dan and Tracey saying the position was still open and asking if there was any chance that I might reconsider my decision.

I felt both the amazement of how the Spirit guides and connects us, and also the fear that had been present from the beginning. But this time, I was going to move forward. I knew that the only way I was going to be able to say “yes” to this was to believe that God loved me enough to be with me in all the unknown, and that God would give me a sense of peace and confidence stronger than the fear I felt.

Mary’s faithful “yes” to God didn’t mean that she would live a life without pain, fear or grief... saying “yes” to God doesn’t automatically “fix” things or make life less difficult. In fact, Mary’s decision to trust God may have led her into years of shame and rejection by her family for having a child out of wedlock. And later on, Mary endured the excruciating pain of watching her son be mocked and ultimately murdered.

My “yes” to God didn’t make things any easier for me. You’ve heard some of my challenges: I’ve had to grow into a community, facing vulnerability and risk. I’ve faced intense fear and anxiety over all the things that can go wrong. I’ve wondered if I’m in the right spot.

But. Even in the midst of all that has been hard, saying “yes” to God has brought so much beauty and growth into my life. Through it all, I’ve had to trust in God’s love for me and God’s presence with me more than ever. And I imagine that Mary’s “yes” to God led her to live a life filled with beauty and growth, too, knowing that God was working through her to invite others into life with Christ.

Mary is often considered to be the model of Christian discipleship because of her remarkable response to the news of the coming Christ. In just a few moments, she goes from saying, “how can this be?” to, “let it be with me according to your word.”

She trusted that God would be her guide as she entered the unknown. She believed that the angel’s words would come into being. She was humble enough to realize that it wasn’t just about her, but that it was part of something far bigger than her. For such a young person, she had a perspective filled with so much wisdom and maturity. I can’t imagine that at that age, I would have had such a calm, confident response to the announcement that my life was about to change in such a way, possibly for worse before it got better.

It makes me wonder if she would have been able to respond so faithfully had she not been reminded from the beginning of God’s gifts of love and presence.

God loves you. God is with you always.

Can you believe this to be true?

And can you allow these truths to transform the way you live into God’s calling for you?