

Saying Yes While Trembling: Mary, Jeremiah, and Inadequacy

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[0 : 00] Good morning. This week's Advent reading is from Luke 1, 26-39 and Jeremiah 1, 4-10.

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, Greetings, you who are highly favored. The Lord is with you.

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, Do not be afraid. Mary, you have found favor with God.

You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.

[1 : 04] The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever. His kingdom will never end. How will this be? Mary asked the angel, since I am a virgin.

The angel answered, The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the Holy One to be born will be called the Son of God.

Even Elizabeth, your relative, is going to have a child in her old age. And she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month, for no word from God will ever fail.

I am the Lord's servant, Mary answered. May your word to me be fulfilled. Then the angel left her. At that time, Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea.

Jeremiah 1, 4-10 The word of the Lord came to me, saying, Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you.

[2 : 06] Before you were born, I set you apart. I appointed you as a prophet to the nations. Alas, sovereign Lord, I said, I do not know how to speak.

I am too young. But the Lord said to me, Do not say I am too young. You must go to everyone I send you to, and to say whatever I command you.

Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you, declares the Lord. Then the Lord reached out his hand and touched my mouth, and said to me, I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant. As a child, As a child, maybe you were told there is nothing to be afraid of.

As adults, when we're most honest, I think we know we have everything to be afraid of. This world, which has been so unsafe to so many of us, cannot be trusted not to harm us again.

[3 : 17] This isn't pessimism, it's confession. This confession by Cole Arthur Riley, embodies our current Advent sermon series, entitled, What Do You Fear?

Insisting on Hope This Advent. Advent is not just about the incarnation. Advent is also about waiting for the triumphant second coming of Jesus.

Yet between these two historical markers, we will experience confessions of fear. Today we will examine the stories of Mary and Jeremiah, two biblical figures who knew confessions of fear all too well.

And yet, God transformed Mary and Jeremiah's fears into seeds of faithfulness. In the midst of fear, Mary and Jeremiah said yes to God.

In today's sermon, in the midst of real confessions of fear, so many of us have. In this Advent, in this time of Herod, I want to explore how we can allow Jesus to enter our fears, not to dispel our fears, but to transform our fears.

[4 : 33] How do we partner with Jesus to turn our fears into a catalyst for love and action? Today, during this third week of Advent, I will be talking about how, even in our fear, we are called forward.

As we heard in today's scriptural reading, we see Mary and Jeremiah experience fear. Mary and Jeremiah also experience a profound call from the Lord and say yes.

Mary and Jeremiah each model how to experience profound fear, but also move forward to saying yes to the call of God on our lives. It reminds me of an experience I had when I was younger, where I had a profound call from the Lord mingled with profound and persistent fear.

You see, I grew up in a black Pentecostal church, and we believe in prophecy, or sort of words of encouragement and sometime insight into the future from the Lord and sort of the plans God had for our lives.

I remember when I was a child, we had a guest preacher. During his sermon, he singled me out, and he gave me a prophetic word. He gave 12-year-old Antonio a word about being called to the nations and impacting international communities.

[5 : 57] Now, keep in mind, this word was super radical at the time. We are in a working-class neighborhood full of lower-income black folk, and no one in that room, myself included, even owned a passport.

Fast forward to when I was 17. I entered into a photo essay contest at my high school, and I won a trip to Nepal. I became the first member of my family to own a passport, and I left America for the first time.

When I was abroad, I felt alive in a whole new way, and I remembered that prophetic word. A few years later, during my college years, this prophetic word came up again.

I went up for prophetic prayer at my church in New Haven, and I was trying to discern law school options as a senior, and it was wild. The person praying for me told me, I actually don't know what God is saying about whether or not you should go to law school, but I am getting an impression that you are called to international ministry and cross-cultural work.

I thought back to the word I received when I was 12, and it hit differently now. At this point, I'd owned a passport, and I'd been out the country a few times.

[7 : 14] Similar to Mary and Jeremiah, it felt like a profound call on my life that had been confirmed by multiple people in multiple communities. However, like Jeremiah and Mary, I also felt fear accompany that call.

It was 2015, and I was a junior associate at a corporate law firm. My church at the time was going to go on a mission trip to India, and I was going to join the team.

I was super excited, because oftentimes, when churches go abroad to do missions work, they do manual labor, they build buildings, they paint houses, but my church partnered with local churches, and we served them through acts of prayer, and worship, and ministry.

And so I was super excited to go to India and support the local Christians in that country. So I went on the trip, had a great time for the two weeks. However, I ended up having a really traumatic experience on the way home, and I actually developed a fear of flying.

And keep in mind, I have been flying all of my life. My parents divorced when I was young, and my dad lived in Oakland, and my mom lived in Los Angeles. So I would fly in elementary school by myself between these two cities.

[8 : 30] And then I went to college on the East Coast, so I would fly multiple times a year between Connecticut and California. I was very accustomed to flying. However, as we were flying back from India to San Francisco, we encountered crazy turbulence.

And not only was there turbulence, there was also lightning flashing in the night sky. And I was freaking out. And it was really funny, I was between two of my church friends.

One church friend was sleeping soundly during all of this. I now know what Jesus' disciples felt like when he was asleep during the storm on the Sea of Galilee. However, my other church friend was similar to me, and she turned on the overhead lights to read the emergency landing proceedings during this turbulence.

We landed safe, but because of this turbulence and the environment, actually developed a severe fear of flying. I remember I would take flights to visit friends or family, and I would be anxious on the ascent.

My heart would race. My breathing would get heavy. And during the flights, I would be really nervous at the first sign of turbulence. Sometimes I would even fall asleep on flights and have

anxiety dreams.

[9 : 52] And in these dreams, the plane would be nose diving. And then I would wake up sort of relieved that the plane was still in the air, but also stressed I was still on an airplane.

However, despite this fear, I would keep flying. I kept getting on planes, and I would listen to worship music by bands like United Pursuit to try to calm my nervous system.

And eventually, the fear of flying dissipated. I believed through a mixture of Jesus and exposure therapy. I have now been to over 40 countries, and I've had the ability to influence governments in the Middle East and Africa, and in many ways, started to fulfill the call of God I received on my life as a kid.

But my testimony is not about overcoming fear. It is about moving forward and trusting God with the call of my sort of life in his hands, even in the midst of fear.

In today's scriptures, we see a similar dynamic with Mary and Jeremiah. When we meet Mary in today's passage, we meet her in the time of Herod.

[11 : 01] The political climate Mary lived in was fraught. Herod, who went by the title king, was a despot who carried out lavish building projects, glorifying empire.

He also murdered one of his wives and his three oldest sons because of suspicion and paranoia. At the same time, King Herod systematically oppressed the Jewish people, including Mary.

It is in the midst of this climate that we see the angel Gabriel appear to a young woman, a virgin, engaged to Joseph. Gabriel appeared to Mary and said that she is highly favored.

But he initially doesn't say why. Of course, Mary is super confused and seemingly a little stressed. Then Gabriel tells Mary, do not be afraid.

You have found favor with God and will conceive and bring a son into the world named Jesus, who will be the son of God. Mary responds that she is a virgin.

[12 : 03] Gabriel replies that the Holy Spirit will cause Mary to conceive. I think we have to remember the historical context where Mary resided. Getting pregnant by God was unprecedented.

This had never happened before in the Hebrew Bible. For all intents and purposes, Mary is pregnant out of wedlock. In a culture full of sexism and patriarchy, this angelic announcement could in many ways seem like a curse.

This could ruin her life. Her fiance could break off the engagement. Her family could disown her. She could face being a societal outcast. We also need to remember Mosaic law.

In Deuteronomy, it says, If a man happens to meet in a town a virgin, pledged to be married, and he sleeps with her, you shall take both of them to the gate of the town and stone them to death.

The young woman, because she was in a town and did not scream for help, and the man, because he violated another man's wife, you must purge the evil from among you. Under the law of Moses, Mary could have even been stoned for the perception of sexual immorality that would result from this pregnancy.

[13 : 18] These were not speculations. These were real and tangible fears. It would make most rational people tell Gabriel, No, thank you.

I don't need to be the mom of God. And yet, Mary replied, Even in the midst of fear, May your word to me be fulfilled. Mary's fear and Mary's yes could coexist.

God fills Mary's womb with divinity in the midst of the trembling. And now, let's turn to Jeremiah's fear and the yes he still gave the Lord.

The story of Mary took place during the time of Herod. Similarly, Jeremiah's story took place during a politically dark time in Israel. During Jeremiah's lifetime, the spiritual and political capital of his nation, Jerusalem, fell to the Babylonians.

Jeremiah himself would become an exile in Egypt. And yet, during the midst of these dark times, when we meet Jeremiah in today's passage, he receives a prophetic call from the Lord to prophesy to a traumatized people.

[14 : 33] In many ways, the DNA of his prophetic call is found even in his name. The etymology of the name Jeremiah has been described twofold. Yahweh is exalted and Yahweh will cast down.

A very appropriate name for a prophet. Yet, despite such a powerful namesake, when we meet Jeremiah in today's passage, his position in many ways mirrors Mary's.

Similar to Mary, he was receiving a huge amount of favor, being called a prophet. Yet, we also need to remember how the nation of Israel treated their prophets.

In Deuteronomy, it says, But a prophet who presumes to speak in the name of anything I have not commanded, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, is to be put to death. You may say to yourselves, How can we know when a message has not been spoken by the Lord? If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has not spoken.

[15 : 39] The prophet has spoken presumptuously, so do not be alarmed. I am not sure who had it worse, a woman pregnant out of wedlock, or a prophet who got something wrong.

Jeremiah's fears were very real as he wrestled with his prophetic call. And yet we hear God lovingly tell Jeremiah that he knew him when he was inside of his mom's womb and that he called him to be a prophet to the nations from in utero.

Jeremiah fearfully replies that he does not know how to speak and that he is too young. God replies to Jeremiah, Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and I will rescue you.

As you can see, God acknowledges Jeremiah's fears. God doesn't gaslight Jeremiah and tell him that obstacles will not arise. He does not lie and say that danger will not come, but he promises his presence in the midst of obstacles.

He promises his rescue in the midst of danger. God also promises equipping. In the passage, it says, then the Lord reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, I have put my words in your mouth.

[16 : 59] In the midst of fear, God touches Jeremiah's lips. In the midst of trembling, God fills Jeremiah's voice with divinity. The call of the Lord over Jeremiah's life was an appointment to be over kingdoms, to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.

The fear Jeremiah experienced did not diminish the call of God on his life. Jeremiah, like so many of us, have been called to uproot and tear down unjust systems.

Jeremiah's call was to destroy and overthrow works of darkness. Jeremiah's call was to build the kingdom of heaven and plant seeds for oaks of righteousness. But what do these confessions of fear and the call of God on the lives of Mary and Jeremiah say to our community today?

I want to be clear. This sermon is not about ignoring fears and rushing into danger. I think about a sermon by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in Montgomery, Alabama, where he explained the biblical refrain of do not fear that we see in the passages today.

Dr. King said, be not afraid does not mean get rid of all fear. Without fear, the human race could have never survived.

[18 : 21] So the difficulty of our problem is that we are not to get rid of fear altogether, but we must harness it and master it. Like fire, it is a useful and necessary servant, but a ruinous master.

It is fear when it becomes terror, panic, and chronic anxiety that we must seek to eliminate.

Reverend Dr. Boy Young Lee echoes Dr. King and says, but this Advent, we're invited to see fear as information.

Some fear protects us, but some fear is the threshold of transformation. The fear that comes when we're on the edge of saying yes. The fear that signals deep vulnerability is the possibility and deep possibility.

Indeed, Dr. Reverend Boy Young Lee asked a question this way. How do you discern between the fears that are protective and the fears that are holding you back from transformation?

I have some insight into how to answer this question based on the experience I had last year. Last year, I went to a Christian conference in Baltimore and it was wild.

[19 : 37] There was a world-famous missionary from Africa who I've seen speaking in front of stadiums full of people. There was also a worship team from Texas who have millions of subscribers who listen to their music.

And yet, I think they didn't advertise this conference that well because when I walk into this conference, there are about 50 people in the auditorium.

So on the second night of the conference, a woman from Louisiana started off preaching a sermon about racial reconciliation and it was really good. But at some point, she started preaching about fear and giving God our fears.

And it was wild because in the middle of her sermon, I started crying. I felt like I was being touched by the Lord. But I was also confused. Outside of my former fear of flying, I felt like I don't really struggle with fear.

I work on racial justice issues in places like Alabama and Texas. I have traveled around the world mostly to solo trips where I've been the only black person for miles.

[20 : 44] I was so confused why my spirit was resonating with a sermon about giving our fear to the Lord. But I just went with it. I let myself experience the emotions that the Lord was bringing up in my heart.

And at the end of the sermon, this woman from Louisiana had an altar call. And so I, of course, went up for prayer. And when the woman prayed for me, I felt the spirit of God overtake me. And I got what they called being slain in the spirit. For those of you who don't know, being slain in the spirit is a Pentecostal charismatic term. And one definition that I found helpful is a temporary physical response to a spiritual encounter with God that involves some or much difficulty with standing.

So at this point, I'm laying on the floor feeling God's love. But if you can imagine, something even more wild happened to me. As I was on the floor, I felt a hand on my shoulder.

And I heard the voice of that world-famous missionary talking to me. And she was laying on the ground next to me, which is hard to believe.

[21 : 55] This woman who I've seen speak in stadiums full of people was now giving me personal one-on-one prayer. And as she began to pray for me, she said something so profound. She said, God told me that you were afraid of yourself.

And she prayed for perfect love to come and cast out all fear. And she said that victory was already here. Her words resonated deeply in my soul.

At times, I am afraid to believe I am who God says I am. I'm afraid to believe that I can really partner with God to bring justice. I'm afraid to believe that Jesus will really prepare a table for me to feast in the presence of my enemies.

I am afraid to believe that I am really more than a conqueror. And these are not the fears that Martin Luther King Jr. was talking about in his sermon. These are not fears which keep me safe.

These are the fears that are holding me back from transformation into the image of the resurrected Christ. It is those fears that we need to lay at the feet of Jesus for him to transform.

[23 : 09] For Mary, her fear was what if I'm not really worthy to carry divinity himself? For Jeremiah, his fear was what if I'm not strong enough to be a voice that tears down unrighteousness and builds up justice?

So many of us have similar fears in our community. What if my pain forever eclipses my ability to feel God's love again? What if I trust God again?

I get let down and I can't handle the disappointment. What if I'm not strong enough to handle the despair of one more unanswered prayer? What if I pick up the Bible again and remember the voices of hate and judgment?

What if I get lost in worship again and get manipulated? What if I go up for prayer again and suffer spiritual abuse?

What if I get judged for offering prayer to a friend? What if people get the wrong impression of me if I'm open about being a Christian? these fears are real.

[24 : 23] Mary's fear was real. Jeremiah's fear was real. But the kindness and the love and the safety of the Lord is also real.

These fears seemingly keep us safe, but they also serve as impediments to our transformation. In order to yield our fears to the Lord like Mary and Jeremiah, we have to trust His voice in our lives. One of my favorite pastors in California has a quote I love. He says, I can't afford to have a thought in my head about me that God does not have about me.

So what thoughts do you have in your head about yourself that God doesn't have about you? How is your fear limiting your faith, limiting your calling?

God says, come to me, even in the midst of your fear. Watch me. I will call you favored like I called Mary. Watch me.

[25 : 28] I will equip you to be a voice for justice like I called Jeremiah. Watch me. I will tell you to let go of the fear you have of yourself like I told Antonio.

When we hear the voice of the Lord, it is scary to believe that we are who he says we are. God calls virgins carriers of divinity.

God calls little boys like Jeremiah to be a prophet to the nations. When we partner with fears of inadequacy, those are not the fears meant to protect us.

Those are lies of the enemy trying to tell us we are not who God says we are. But thank you, Jesus. As Reverend Lee says, fear doesn't disqualify us.

It is part of the process. And God promises to walk with us every trembling step. This Advent, we ask, what fear are you carrying?

[26 : 29] What invitation are you resisting because you feel inadequate? What would it mean to say yes? Not fearlessly, but faithfully. Mary's words can become our own.

Let it be with me. Advent is about the coming of Christ both the first time and the second time. But as we wait for his return, while we are in these liminal moments, these liminal spaces, we can experience the coming of Christ through the Holy Spirit and the transformation that Jesus has for us.

As we go into Advent, may we examine the places in our lives where we need to hear the loving voice of God mingle our fears with courage and identity as we saw him doing the lives of Mary and Jeremiah.

Advent is about the coming of a God who is in deep solidarity with us in every season, including seasons of darkness and waiting. May we invite God into the places where fear has echoed louder than love.

May it mean so many different things in different seasons, but his voice will always be that of comfort and of compassion and love. And how to do this?

[27 : 46] It looks different for all of us. Maybe it means reading scripture again. Maybe it means engaging in personal prayer again. Maybe it means listening to worship music again.

I don't know what it looks like, but what I do know is that even baby steps are progress. And one thing Advent teaches us is that our God does not disappoint.

Those who wait on him will not be put to shame. He came once and he will come again, even in the midst of fear and darkness. Amen.

Amen.