

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Luke 1:26-38

“Do Not Be Afraid”

In today's Gospel reading Mary's first response to the angel showing up was subdued. Mary, a young teenage girl, probably between 12 and 14 years of age, she wasn't terrified. She seemed more questioning of the angel's appearance than scared by it. The angel shared good news with Mary. He said she was highly favored, that God had chosen her to be part of His wonderful plans, and that the Lord was with her. Mary most certainly needed to know that the Lord was with her and she needed to know that what was going to happen was part of God's plans. That is why Gabriel told Mary not to be afraid. Because Mary's life was about to be turned upside-down forever. And you have got to agree - that's never an easy thing to handle.

For the most part, I think you will agree with me, change is hard. We welcome positive change: a better job, a new relationship, an improvement of some kind in our lives, new floors, new carpet – those are nice changes. Getting used to the new thing takes time. Now, just picture Mary's changes. She was engaged to a good man, Joseph of Nazareth. They were going to be married. Back then, an engagement was practically as binding as a marriage. To end an engagement was the same as divorce.

Then the angel showed up and told her she was going to have a baby. That would be stunning enough. Let's pause there for a moment. Even if girls got married as teenagers back then, and it was expected, you tell her she's pregnant out of wedlock, too? Nowadays, it's shameful. Then it was disgraceful – it could get you stoned to death. Nowadays it's sad. Then it was considered sinful.

This was going to be a whole new world for Mary by becoming pregnant and the angel told her not to be afraid about it. Any plan that Mary has for her life and for her family were changed forever by the announcement that she would have a baby. All of Mary's plans – like any teen – were now out the window. If that wasn't enough - throw in the fact that it was absolutely impossible since she was a virgin and had never been with a man. Now, that's even more of a shock - she was having a baby out of wedlock, and there's the shock of being impossibly pregnant – with the Son of God!

This whole thing is about Jesus coming to earth. You see, Mary's plans weren't being changed just for the sake of change; it wasn't some whim or flight of fancy. Mary's plans were being changed because it was for the greater good for all of mankind. Even if the changes were not going to be 100% pleasant, they were certainly good.

One of my favorite stories by C. S. Lewis, actually a series, is the Chronicles of Narnia. My hero in the Chronicles of Narnia is the King, the lion Aslan. When he returns, he will set the world right. Right now Narnia is under the control of an evil person – the White Witch. There's an old saying, “Wrong will be right, when Aslan comes in sight, at the sound of his roar, sorrows will be no more, when he bares his teeth, winter meets its death, and when he shakes his mane, we

shall have spring again.”

But the question is, is Aslan dangerous? Well, yes. He is. I mean, have you ever met a tame lion? He most certainly is not safe. But, he’s good. He’s not safe, but he’s good.

I think that describes God’s plans too. They are not always safe. No one said it would be an easy ride. They will sometimes lead us into dangerous places. Missionaries go to unsafe places. Many of the early explorers were believers, and they entered unsafe places. Many believers over the years have lost their lives because they were willing to follow their faith in unsafe places, like Communist regimes, radical Muslim countries, or extreme Hindu nations. Look - if you think that following God’s plans will always lead you to green pastures and beside still waters, you’re in for a shock. God’s plans are not always safe.

But they are good. God’s plans for Mary’s life were good. She was favored. The Lord was with her! She was in for an amazing, but not easy life. Simeon’s words in Luke 2:35 when he said to Mary, *“And a sword will pierce your own soul too.”* When Jesus was an 8-day old baby the naming ceremony was to take place at the Temple – also the circumcision. In Luke 2:35, Simeon, an old man at the Temple told Mary that a sword would pierce her own soul too. Simeon knew that Mary was going to have a rough time in being the mother of the Son of God.

And then there were prophecies; Mary knew them all; almost as many prophecies about a suffering Messiah as there were about a kingly Messiah. The people were excited about the Messiah coming to rule, but they didn’t piece it together that the Messiah would also go through torment, too.

The beginning of Psalm 22 shows us so much about Jesus’ life which He cried out: *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* Zechariah 11:12 mentions Judas’ betrayal: *“So they paid me thirty pieces of silver.”* Zechariah 12:10 says these words of God: *“They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son.”* And Zechariah 13:7 says, *“Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.”*

The Prophet Isaiah is chock-full of words concerning the suffering Messiah. 50:6 says, *“I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting.”* And 53:1-10 is so clear a passage about Jesus. It says, *“He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely, he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.”*

You see, this is the sword that would pierce Mary’s heart. Her firstborn would suffer this fate,

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and she would see it. She would be a witness to all of it. Is this safe? Is this pleasant? No, of course not. But is it good? It was good for us that Jesus suffered, because it is through His suffering that we find forgiveness. The angel told Mary not to fear God's plans for her life. "Don't be afraid of how God will do His will in your life," Gabriel told her. Perhaps he would say the same thing to us if he came to us today. Don't be afraid of what God wants to do in your life. Don't be afraid of how His plans are changing yours.

So what of your plans does God seem to be changing? What is not turning out the way you wanted? What is God leading you to do that you just don't want to do? What is happening that you don't know if you have the courage to handle whatever it is?

I tell you, don't be afraid. Things may not turn out the way you expected or wanted, but if you let God be God, things will turn out good. Maybe not safe, maybe not easy, but good. His plans for your life are to be prosperous, but that doesn't exclude painful along the way.

So what fear do you need to surrender to God today? Fear of a new job or new home? Maybe you got a new dog and you are afraid to leave him alone in the house? Fear of the future and all that it holds? Fear of loneliness, fear of failure? What changes are you afraid of? I encourage you to spend some time talking to God about them in particular, and ask Him for strength to do the right thing anyway. Never forget – Jesus said, "*I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*" (Matthew 28:20)

There may be times, especially during the holiday season, where you might feel alone, or you might feel darkened a little bit. Always remember that God's Holy Spirit lives within you: "*Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit?*" (1 Corinthians 6:19) You are never alone! Just look to Him. Remember the two three word prayers: "Help me Jesus" and most especially – "Thank you Jesus!"