

First Sunday of Advent, Sunday, November 27, 2022, Year A

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA:

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Luke 1:26-38

"Don't Be Afraid"

The teenager Mary's response to the angel coming wasn't that of a terrified young maiden. She seemed to be more questioning of the angel's appearance than scared by it. The Angel Gabriel shared good news with Mary. He said that she was highly favored, and that God had chosen her to be part of His wonderful plans. Gabriel said 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. Which is why Gabriel told Mary not to be afraid. Because Mary's life was about to be turned upside-down forever. And that's never an easy thing to handle.

Generally, change is hard. Positive changes we generally welcome. A better job, a new relationship, an improvement of some kind in our lives, but even then, a change comes with certain difficulties. Getting used to the new thing takes time. Getting married is wonderful, but then you have to give up half the bed. It's a welcome change, but it's still a change that takes some getting-used-to.

Now, picture Mary's changes. She was engaged to a good man, Joseph. 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.

So 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, consider that she's pregnant out of wedlock, too. Nowadays, it's shameful. Then it was disgraceful. Nowadays it's sad. Then it was considered sinful.

Mary was entering a whole new world by becoming pregnant. That was a change that she seemed to embrace well, but the angel still told her not to be afraid over it. Mary's plans for her life and for her family were changed forever by the announcement that she would have a baby. As if hearing the news that you were going to have a baby isn't life-changing enough throw in the fact that it was impossible for her. She was a virgin. She had never been with a man. Now, that's even more of a shock, and then there's the shock that she was having a baby out of wedlock, but there's the shock of being impossibly pregnant.

On top of it all, please don't forget the main point of this account: the shock of being pregnant with the Son of God. That's what this is about. This is about Jesus coming to earth. You see, Mary's plans weren't being changed just for the sake of change. It wasn't just 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.

I am reminded of the Chronicles of Narnia. The King, the lion Aslan, is returning to the fantasy world of Narnia. When he returns, he will set the world right. 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 real question is, is he 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. 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, sorry, 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 had found favor with God. You can see the excitement in Mary’s voice as she sang her song that we call the Magnificat, in Luke 1:46-55. She was excited to be part of God’s plans. She took the angel’s words to heart when he said, “Don’t be afraid.”

But I need to take you to Simeon’s words in Luke 2:35 when he said to Mary, “*And a sword will pierce your own soul too.*” Simeon knew that Mary was going to have a rough time in being the mother of the Son of God. You see, there were prophecies. There were 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.

Psalm 22 shows us so much about Jesus’ life. Verse 1: “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” Verse 7-8 describe the events at the cross: “*All who see me mock me; they make mouths at me; they wag their heads; “He trusts in the LORD; let him deliver him; let him rescue him, for he delights in him!”* And then verses 17-18, “*I can count all my bones-- they stare and gloat over me; they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.*”

The Prophet Zechariah mentions Judas’ betrayal in 11:12: “*And they weighed out as my wages thirty pieces of silver.*” Zechariah 12:10 says these words of God: “*when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn.*” And Zechariah 13:7 says, “*Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.*”

And Isaiah is chock-full of words concerning the suffering Messiah. 50:6 says, “*I gave my back to those who strike, and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard; I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting.*” 52:14 says, “*his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the children of mankind--*”

And 53:1-10 is so clear a passage about Jesus. It says, “*For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at*

First Sunday of Advent, Sunday, November 27, 2022, Year A

him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned--everyone--to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth."

You see, this is the sword that would pierce Mary's heart. Her firstborn would suffer this fate, and she would see it. Is this safe? Is this pleasant? No, of course not. But is it good? Yes, most definitely. 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. He told her not to be afraid of how God will do His will in her life. Perhaps he would say the same thing to us. 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?

I tell you, don't be afraid. Things may not turn out the way you expected or wanted, but if you let God do His thing, 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 Him today? Fear of a new job or a new home? 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. He will be with you!