

**A Sermon by Rev. Eric R. Dillenbeck
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
December 21, 2008
8:30 am Worship Service
Do Not Be Afraid
Text: Luke 1:26-38**

A few months ago Agnes Norfleet, a good friend of mine, was here preaching at my service of installation. Her sermon title was “Holy Interruptions” and she reminded us of the many ways being a disciple of Jesus Christ interrupts the normal patterns and expectations of our life and how these interruptions call us to new life in Christ.

Today, we hear about a huge interruption, one that turned a girl’s world upside down and in so doing brought new life and light to the entire world.

Let’s listen for God’s word speaking to us today from the Gospel of:

Luke 1:26-38

²⁶In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. ²⁸And Gabriel came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”

²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

³⁰The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He 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. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

³⁴Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?”

³⁵The 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. ³⁶And 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. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God.”

³⁸Then 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.

The Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God

“Do Not Be Afraid”

Can you imagine, there you are, going about your daily routine, taking care of the normal business of the day; when all of a sudden an Angel comes to you with words of praise saying, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”

Now, if I gave into my more cynical side I would be forced to admit to myself that my immediate response to these glorious words would be skepticism. I would think,

“Uh oh, what does this heavenly creature want?”

You can just tell that Ole Gabriel is buttering little Mary up and all I want to say is “shoo, go away Gabriel. Leave that poor girl alone.”

But that is only if I give into my more cynical side.

Of course every time we read this passage in preparation for Christmas it feels like I am watching someone pull someone else from a car. I know I should help, but all I can do is watch as the action unfolds. All I can do is watch as the life of this sweet adolescent girl is turned upside down.

There was nothing exceptional about Mary. She was just a typical Jewish adolescent, no different from any of her peers, with no expectations other than what would be anticipated for a young woman in her town: marriage, child-bearing, care of the household, hard work, growing old with her husband, keeping the faith.

She was engaged to a good man, she was making plans; that is until she hears, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”

The text tells us she was “much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be,” which is the Bible’s nice way of saying, “Excuse me, what?”

She was a good Jewish girl, which means she would remember and understand the role of Angels: to announce the intrusion of the divine into earthly life. That simple “greetings favored One!” would have been pregnant with possibility for Mary. Of course she had no idea how pregnant it really was.

When we are greeted by the divine and unexpected, I am pretty sure we get perplexed too. I imagine Mary was present with Gabriel for a minute and then the next she was consumed by her own thoughts, wondering what this angel’s presence could mean for her.

Probably sensing Mary’s concern and anxiety Gabriel pulls her back to reality. “Do not be afraid...”

“Why would the angel have said that to her – because Gabriel was about to bring radical change and disruption into Mary’s life. This angel told her she had found favor with God. But some favoritism this is! Not only will she bear a child, out of wedlock. She’s even being told what name to call this childⁱ.”

She had plans...

She had a life...

And now there is this Angel hanging around talking about a pregnancy. How is Mary not supposed to be afraid? How are we not supposed to be afraid?

In our heads we know this is glad tidings of great joy, but in our guts we know God is about to intrude, we know God is about to disrupt everything Mary knows. Of course she is going to be scared. Of course she is going to worry, like us, she is only human.

We come to worship each week, we live lives of faith, but we are a people who love order over chaos. We enjoy sitting in our orderly rows, we enjoy knowing our church governance is decent and in order, but as we can see from the scripture this morning our story is not orderly. Rather it is one of shock, surprise and disorder.

We preachers like to talk about Jesus who calms life's storms and brings stability and peace, but every year we are reminded that his life did not begin that way. And just as the Angel Gabriel disordered Mary's life, being followers of Jesus means our lives will get messy, they will get turned upside down when God calls.

Do not be afraid!

Of course Mary was scared. Of course we are nervous. That is only natural, it is only human. How do we respond to the fear of chaos? How do we respond to topsy turvy feelings? Do we wrestle for control? Do we drift off and ignore the opportunities we are being called too?

In an environment in which we see our portfolios shrinking do we step back and hold on tighter to what is ours, or do we recognize that all we have is from God and turn around and invest in the promises of God's future.

During these times, when we see runs on the Food Banks of our city, do we cling to what we have, ensuring that we have enough, or do we throw open the doors to our cabinets and give until our cabinets are bare so that others might have enough too?

Do not be afraid!

Recently I was watching one of my favorite Christmas movies, *The Family Stone*. I love this movie because, for me, it truly captures Christmas. It tells the story of a family gathering for Christmas, but instead of picture perfect moments we see all the mess of one family under one roof. We see all the stress and dysfunction – It's great! In a particularly powerful scene we see Diane Keaton's character talking with her husband.

After confirming that her cancer had returned she is lying in bed and she admits her fear. In the midst of the messy nature of her current family relationships she is afraid because she knows she's dying. Despite her fear, she remains open. She remains engaged in her life and from the midst of profound brokenness we see new life beginning to spring forth in her family.

As we move closer to the celebration of Christmas morning we learn from Mary, the mother of Jesus, about how God comes into people's very ordinary lives and transforms them into something holy. Mary understood that God is at work in unexpected and sometimes scary places. In the life of a simple country girl we learn that God can be at work in perhaps the most unexpected place of all, in our own lives.

The life of Mary invites the church to ponder what kind of community we choose to be. Are we a community, ruled by fear, who clings to the way things have always been? Do we cling to our glory days and to the expectations placed upon us by others?

Or, like Mary, do we, upon hearing the call of God, resign ourselves to live with the fear and step out in faith, saying, “Here we are, the servants of the Lord;
Let it be with us according to your word.”

ⁱ William H. Willimon, Pulpit Resource, Vol. 36 – Dec. 21, 2008 “Back to the Stable,” page51.

With the words of the Angel Gabriel ringing in our ears let us affirm what we believe this day.

The Rev. Eric Dillenbeck, M.D.V.