

troubled... and wondered what kind of greeting this might be" (1:29). Greatly troubled doesn't seem strong enough to me. I bet Mary was scared out of her sandals. I'll bet she screamed and covered her eyes and froze before the hovering specter.

And who would blame her? This is not an experience many of us have. Contrary to popular television shows, angels do not regularly appear before us. We might wish for kindly, old Clarence from *It's a Wonderful Life* to show us the way. Or for *Touched by an Angel's* problem-solving Monica to make things right for us. But if we're being honest, I suspect that should an angel appear, we'd be scared witless. So, I have no doubt believing that Mary was "greatly troubled" when Gabriel appeared.

Which is why Gabriel said what angels always say to terrified human beings, "Do not be afraid!" Thanks for that, Gabriel, but it's too late! That horse has bolted. Then Gabriel tells Mary why she need not be afraid: "You have found favor with God" (1:30). This is Gabriel's lead-in to the good news of his message: "You will conceive and have a son, and you are to call him Jesus." Ok, so maybe not great news, given Mary's circumstances as a young, unwed teenage girl. Then Gabriel drops some more news on Mary: "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. 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" (1:32-33).

That's a lot of expectation for a child yet to be born. I imagine Mary's terror at an angel appearing is giving way to some extreme anxiety. We know that Jesus will be great because he is perfect in nature. Jesus will be great because he will achieve great things. Jesus will be great because he rescues God's people. Jesus will be great in the eyes of those who believe. Jesus will be THE honor student at Nazareth High School. But there's more! Jesus will be called the Son of the Most High, that is, the Son of God. Jesus is Mary's son, but he is also God's Son. God will give Jesus the throne of his ancestor David, meaning Jesus is the Messiah whom God promised would save God's people. Jesus will have the authority to rule over Israel, and his reign will last forever. For a first-time parent, there's a lot of anxiety in those predictions.

How would you respond to such news? Mary was fearful of the messenger, now she is anxious about the message! To that point, Mary asks a qualifying question: "How can this be since I am a virgin?" (1:34). It's the same question Zechariah asked of Gabriel

when told he would have a son (without the virgin part). "How can this be?" But whereas Zechariah asked the question out of skeptical unbelief, Mary asks her question in wonder-filled faith. She believes Gabriel, but she is curious as to the methodology.

Gabriel obliges her with an equally terrifying and anxiety laden answer. "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" (1:35). The Holy Spirit, that is God, will come bringing all of God's power and majesty and might and awesomeness, and God's Spirit will "overshadow" Mary (literally, "cover with a cloud"). The aura of God's glory, the visible manifestation of God's presence and power, will embrace Mary.

Only six other people in the Bible experienced God's presence: Adam and Eve (who walked with God in the garden), Moses (at the burning bush), the prophet Isaiah (in a vision), the apostle John (in a vision), and Jesus (who is God). What is more, the Bible is clear that to see God face-to-face is more than humankind can comprehend (and may possibly be fatal!), which is why God shields Moses with God's hand as God passes.

So, yeah, there's some anxiety about meeting God and bearing God's Son. But that's just the tip of the anxiety iceberg for Mary. What would her fiancé Joseph think of this? What would her parents think? What would her neighbors think? What if they all disowned her? Could she raise this child on her own? Was she ready to be a mother? Was she prepared to be the mother of God's Son? How do you raise God's Son? What does the Son of God eat? How do you discipline the Son of God (do you need to)? Do you send him to school, or does he just know everything? Was this real, or was she hallucinating? So many anxious questions!

As proof that God would fulfill this promise, and to allay some of Mary's anxiety, Gabriel announces that Mary's much older cousin Elizabeth is already with child ("in her sixth month," 1:36), "for nothing will be impossible for God" (1:37). In some translations, Gabriel says, "for no word from God will ever fail" (1:37, NIV). This is the pivotal moment. How will Mary react? Will she activate her fight or flight response? Will she shoo Gabriel out and reject God's proposal? Or will she acknowledge what Gabriel says, and undertake God's purpose for her life? Mary's answer is acceptance: "I am the Lord's

servant...May your word to me be fulfilled” (1:38). Satisfied with this answer, Gabriel departs.

Mary made peace with her fears. I’m sure she still had sleepless nights, cold sweats, and panic attacks about being a mother; but she did not let those fears, or those anxieties control her. She chose to confront her fears and face down her anxieties rather than avoid them. She chose to accept the unpredictability of life and the inevitability of experiencing painful emotions, so that she could make peace with her fears and reclaim her life from anxiety.

Mary calmed her fears and vanquished her anxieties by putting her faith and trust and future in God’s hands. She believed that God was working something new and wonderful on behalf of the world, and she was willing to be part of it. Mary chose to make peace – God’s peace – with her fears and anxieties. God’s peace which brings healing and wholeness. God’s peace which brings transformation and new life. God’s peace which banishes fear and anxiety. God’s peace which ushers in a new world where there is “no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Revelation 21:4).

Fear is a part of human life, and human beings are adept at making anxious mountains out of mole hills. We cannot expect to live free from fear and anxiety; but how we choose to handle those fear-filled and anxious-ridden moments makes the difference in how we live our life. When we accept the fickleness of life coupled with the faithfulness of God who is always with us, we can respond without fear or anxiety as Mary did: “let your word to me be fulfilled.”

Prayer: Ever-Present God, I pray that You would make me increasingly sensitive to Your Word and responsive to your leading and guidance. Open my ears to hear to Your still small voice within my heart and help me to discern the many and various messengers that you graciously place in my path. Lord, that I may love you more dearly and hear you more clearly with each passing day, in Jesus’ name I pray, AMEN.

Source: Jordan Fiorillo Scotti. “Making Peace with Fear.” March 9, 2020. *Psychology Today*.
www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/buddhist-psychology-east-meets-west/202002/making-peace-fear. Retrieved November 18, 2021.

Making Peace With Fear

Second Sunday of Advent, December 5, 2021

Luke 1:26-38

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

In *Little Women*, Louisa May Alcott wrote: “I am not afraid of storms, for I am learning how to sail my ship.” In the age of sailing ships, sailors on the high seas had to make peace with the wind and the waves. With great respect for nature, and a healthy fear of what Mother Nature could do, they learned to harness the wind and propel their ships through the waves. By making peace with their fears, they discovered new worlds.

Fear is hardwired into our human nature. Fear protects us from the things that would harm us. Fear may also motivate us to accomplish great things. Fear is an essential part of human life. But what happens when we lose control and fear rules us? What happens when we stop living in the flow of life due to fear of what might go wrong?

As we begin to unpack this, we need to make a distinction between fear and anxiety. Jordan Fiorillo Scotti, writing in *Psychology Today*, says that fear occurs in the moment, as the response to a specific threat. We may fear spiders, or snakes, or darkness, or heights, but those are temporary, situation-based fears. We can find ways to avoid or deal with those fears (take flight or stand and fight). In such cases, says Scotti, fear can save your life.

Anxiety is different because it is anticipatory. Anxiety is the dread of what may happen. In truth, human beings tend to be more anxious than afraid. We imagine all sorts of problems and conjure up all sorts of dreadful scenarios, most of which will never play out. Unlike fear, anxiety will not save your life; it may in fact, reduce the scope and possibly shorten your life.

In our reading today, Mary is visited by the angel Gabriel who brings her some surprising news. Gabriel begins with words that sound friendly enough: “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.” But consider that Mary is staring down a heavenly being, an angel of the Lord, a divine messenger who simply appeared inside her home. What a terrifying prospect! Luke reports that Mary was “greatly