

The Way of Jesus: A Journey Through Luke
Part 8: Nothing to fear

Countryside Community Church
Rev. Eric Elnes, Ph.D.
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Scripture: 1:26-38

God, do we ever need Christmas this year! With violence erupting from Paris to San Bernardino, provoking renewed pledges to respond to violence with even greater violence ourselves, we could all use some “good news of great joy” such as the angels announced on that original Christmas Eve. And with the Paris conference on climate change moving toward either an unprecedented commitment by the world’s nations to preserving the future of earth’s vital ecosystems at the end of this coming week, or a fateful *lack* of commitment, wouldn’t we all welcome the assurance that this world is in better hands than we ourselves can provide?

We think times are violent and uncertain now, and they are. But 2,000 years ago the world was filled with uncertainty and violence, too. And what did God do about it? God sent a baby.

A baby might not seem like much of a response. Yet if Christians and Muslims are correct in their shared belief that Jesus’ birth was the result of divine providence, then it’s worth asking: What is it about sending a baby that is preferable to the innumerable alternatives that were theoretically available to God, like sending an angel army loaded with the most powerful weapons of mass destruction to keep the peace? And what is it about God’s preferred response that may guide our own response today?

An often-overlooked clue to God’s strange wisdom is found in the biblical story of the Annunciation – that is, the account in Luke’s gospel of the archangel Gabriel’s announcement to Mary of her pregnancy. According to Luke, the archangel’s message *to* Mary was accompanied by a message *about* Mary:

“You’re beautiful with God’s beauty. Beautiful inside and out!”

Some people believe the reference to God’s beauty within Mary proves that Mary was completely without sin. Yet according to Luke, not even Jesus was without sin, making Mary’s unblemished nature unlikely. Talk of Mary’s lowly humanity may diminish her status in the eyes of some, but given how our own imperfections loom so large right now, perhaps the fact that Mary was not so different from us makes her more relevant than ever, therefore worth paying attention to.

Luke tells us that Mary was “thoroughly shaken” over the angel’s declaration of God’s beauty within her. And why wouldn’t she be shaken? The grandeur of the gift being given in Jesus, and the responsibility that came with the gift, would surely have made the stoutest of hearts flutter.

I wonder if Mary didn’t experience a premonition, too, of the violence with which the world would receive Jesus in his day. If so, it would have made the Annunciation all the more rattling. Still, Mary moves from being “thoroughly shaken” to declaring with perfect peace and confidence: “I’m the Lord’s maid, ready to serve. *Let it be with me just as you say.*”

While the challenges Mary faced – both from the world’s violent response to Jesus and from her own imperfect abilities to act as mother and guardian of the Messiah – would likely have remained with her, her confident acceptance of these challenges indicate that these challenges had somehow become irrelevant in her eyes.

Irrelevant, but compared to what? Like King David who found God’s comfort even while walking “through the valley of the shadow of death,” the Annunciation set a table before Mary in the presence of her enemies, both external and internal, such that her cup overflowed and she experienced the anointing oil of God’s goodness and mercy. (Psalm 23)

I’ll never forget the day Melanie and I first learned that we were pregnant with our first child. Melanie went from being “thoroughly shaken” to peaceful and confident in a matter of minutes. For her, it was like a gift had been given that was greater than anything she had ever imagined she would be capable of receiving. Like Mary, the awareness of “God’s beauty ... inside and out” helped Melanie overcome her own maternal insecurities.

And me? Well, it took a bit longer. Like nine months. Yet when I glimpsed Arianna for the first time, 99% of my fear and terror simply evaporated and was replaced by awe and wonder. My sense of inadequacy as a new and inexperienced father remained, but it no longer mattered nearly as much as I thought it would. All I cared about was the fact that I could literally touch grace and cradle perfection in my arms. Whatever the future held, it would never be able to take away the joy I experienced in that moment. That moment has turned into twenty-four years of awe and wonder.

While our family presently faces formidable challenges with respect to the treatment of Arianna’s brain tumor, even these fail to match even a fraction of the awe and wonder, the gratitude and assurance, we feel as parents who continue to experience “God’s beauty ... inside and out.” This is the true gift. The perspective that love and grace bring to an imperfect world. Next to this, all other fears, while real and at times jarring, ultimately become irrelevant. Arianna is certainly no Jesus, but in loving and cherishing God’s gift to

us in Arianna, we have come to know how fully – and decisively – salvation comes to the human heart when fear comes face-to-face with a newborn child, given by God.

What does all this have to do with global violence and terror, and the possibility of cataclysmic climate change? I suspect that neither Arianna's birth, nor even that of Jesus, will defeat the powers of evil that run rampant across the world. One day any of us may fall prey to a terrorist bullet or bomb, and one day each one of us will most certainly fall prey to failing health. But the fact that God keeps sending babies in response to the terrors and violence of the world, including a most important baby whose birth we celebrate at Christmas, keeps telling us that all these fears, though real, are ultimately irrelevant. God may not remove the threats but, with Mary, we hear the angel announcing to us and to everyone who recognizes the value of the gifts they have been given: "You have nothing to fear." (Luke 1:30)

If the world succeeds in moving beyond its present state of terrorism and saber-rattling, surely it will be through fearless people full of "God's beauty ... inside and out" who meet fear with faith, and whose hearts are moved not by the possibility of death, but by the reality of a child.