

DO NOT BE AFRAID, MARY!

December 17, 2017

The Rev. Dr. Howard Chapman
First Presbyterian Church of Marion, Iowa
Text: Luke 1:26-38, 46-55

SCRIPTURE

Luke 1:26-38, 46-55

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He 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. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The 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. And 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. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then 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.

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

The Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God!

SERMON

Well, at long last the time of waiting is over. Yes, that season of anticipation, all those days of expectation and wondering, that is all behind us. Now we are done with guessing and speculation. Now we know what we need to know, for it has finally arrived. Yes, that's right, *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, the ninth film to be made in the series opened in theaters nationwide last Friday. Has anyone here seen it yet? If so, may the Force be with you.

So far the reviews for this latest installment in the Star Wars saga have been pretty good. There seems to be a nice mixture of decent dialogue, exciting action, special effects, humor and suspense. But as I read the reviews, one theme that seemed to come up again and again is the role of strong women in this film. This is due, in part, to Carrie Fisher, who played Princess Leia back in the original Star Wars movie that opened 40 years ago in 1977. (That makes some of us feel very old.) She now plays, not Princess, but *General* Leia Organa, thank you very much. The review I read says she comes across as calm, resolute and competent, as she leads the rebel forces in battle against the evil First Order Empire. This was Carrie Fisher's last performance before she passed away just about a year ago, and so it pulls on a lot of emotional strings. But the lead character is Rey, young

Jedi wannabe, and the Force is strong with her. She comes to train under the old Jedi master, Luke Skywalker, who is played once again by Mark Hamill. As you know, he played the original Luke back in '77. Then there is Vice Admiral Amilyn Holdo, who is a formidable officer to be reckoned with. There is Rose Tico, a scrappy, heroic rebel fighter. And there is even a scary female villain, Captain Phasma who commands the evil Empire's storm troopers.

Now if you have followed the Star Wars movies you know that there have been strong women in the past. Princess Leia in the original was by no means a helpless damsel-in-distress waiting for rescue. But this latest installment seems to be very deliberate about challenging gender roles and shattering stereotypes. The women in this movie are much more likely to be wearing armor and firing weapons than they are to be wearing lavish white dresses or having flowers in their hair.

The strong women in this film have been seen by many as reflective of a much needed transformation in society. Back in October actress Alyssa Milano, in response to the public accusations against film mogul Harvey Weinstein popularized the "me too" movement on social media, encouraging women who had experienced sexual harassment or abuse to say "me too" and tell their story. It led to hundreds of thousands of posts on Twitter and FaceBook. Out of such a wide spread response *Time* magazine this year has named the Silence Breakers as "Person of the Year" for 2017. These are mostly women, but some men, who broke the silence this year and reported sexual harassment and abuse by men who are leaders in business, entertainment and politics. Their courage and insistence that they be heard has resulted in the downfall and disgrace of a number of prominent and powerful men in our country.

Now, I realize I am going from one extreme to another. While Star Wars is meant to be fun and entertaining, there is nothing amusing about sexual abuse. But it does seem that there has been a shift this year, one long overdue, where women are being recognized as strong, determined and capable. They must be listened to. They must receive justice. They must be encouraged to tell their stories.

So here we are a week before Christmas and we hear an ancient story of a young woman, a teenage girl most likely and at first glance it does not appear that any of it has much in common with the Star Wars heroines and the Silence Breakers. We are continuing our sermon series on the texts leading up to the birth of the baby in Bethlehem. We are focusing on how God communicates directly with someone through a heavenly messenger. Each time an angel appears to someone they tell them "Do not be afraid!" Two weeks ago we heard about an angel appearing to Zechariah in the temple, with the message that even though he and his wife were well past child bearing age they would have a son who would grow up to be John the Baptist. Next week at the morning service, Pastor Beth will be preaching about the angel appearing in a dream to Joseph, the father of Jesus. At the seven o'clock evening service I will be focusing on the angels appearing to the shepherds out on the Judean hillside. But this morning we are looking at the story of the angel Gabriel visiting Mary to tell her that she will be the mother of one who will be a Savior.

It is a story that has been told and retold for centuries and so it has layers and layers of traditions and legends surrounding it. Down through the centuries many in the Church have elevated Mary, calling her the Mother of God and the Queen of Heaven, and ultimately leading to the practice in the Roman Catholic church of reciting as a prayer words from the Gospel of Luke, the Ave Maria, or Hail Mary. Now since the Reformation, those of us who are Protestants have backed away from such practices. But even as Protestants, we too have our own preconceived notions about Mary and especially the events surrounding the birth of Jesus. You can hear these ideas in many of the Christmas carols. "Gentle Mary laid her child, lowly in the manger." "Mary was the mother mild, Jesus Christ the little child."

Frankly, our Christmas card image of Mary is not of a strong woman. It is of a shy demure teenage girl, gentle, meek and mild, in awe of what is happening and very much in need of the protection and care of strong, brave Joseph. But if we read the text carefully and deliberately, that is not exactly the way Mary is portrayed.

To begin with, while the first thing the angels say to Zechariah, Joseph and the Shepherds, is “Do not be afraid!” that is not the first thing the angel says to Mary. No, he says, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” Think about that. In the stories surrounding the birth of Jesus, it is the men who are frightened and need reassurance, not Mary. Now the text goes on to say that she was perplexed or startled by that greeting, and is rather confused by what is going on, and who could blame her? It is then that the angel says, “Do not be afraid...” But Mary’s reaction is quite a contrast to a few verses before when the angel appears to Zechariah and it says he was terrified and fear overwhelmed him. That is not at all the way Mary responded to the presence of this heavenly being.

The angel goes on to explain exactly what God wants her to do. She will become pregnant, give birth to a son, and his name will be Jeshuah or Jesus, which means “Savior.” And Mary’s response is very interesting. Zechariah, you might recall, wanted proof of what the angel was promising. I believe it was with a cynical tone that he asked, “How will I know this is so? For I am an old man and my wife is getting on in years.” Mary does not require proof, nor is she cynical. She merely asks for some clarification. “How can this be,” she asks, “since I am a virgin?” Mary is calm, keeping her wits about her, and open to what God is asking of her. This is not some quiet, innocent girl who naively accepts what is happening. This is someone who is confident, intelligent and understands full well the implications of what the angel is saying. Now, in the stories found in the Hebrew scriptures there are other accounts of miraculous births. There is the story of Moses escaping the murderous decree of Pharaoh. We find the stories of the births of Samson and of Samuel. While the story of Jesus’ birth has some similarities to these accounts, this conversation between Mary and the angel is more like stories when God calls individuals to be prophets.

These call stories have a distinct pattern. There is a greeting and the individual is startled by the greeting. Then there is a reassurance (Do not be afraid) followed by an explanation of the task. Moses is told to go to Pharaoh. Jeremiah is told that he is to speak to the nations. Jonah is told he is to go to Ninevah. Then there is an objection. Moses says he is not good at public speaking. Jeremiah says he is too young, just a kid. Isaiah says he has a dirty mouth. This is followed by a reassurance that God will be with the person, and in the end the one who is called accepts the task God has assigned.

This is exactly the same pattern found in the annunciation to Mary. So what Luke is telling us is that Mary is a prophet, rather than some mild innocent young thing whose only job is to carry a baby for nine months. And just as a reminder, a prophet is not necessarily one who can foretell the future. A prophet is one who brings to God’s people the Word of God. Mary does indeed do just that because through her, as it says in John’s Gospel, the Logos, the Word of God, becomes flesh and lives among us. She is the means by which God is best able to communicate with us. So when the angel says, “Do not be afraid,” it is about more than just being startled by his appearance. The angel is saying, “Do not be afraid to do what you know you must do. Do not be afraid to be who you know you are. Do not be afraid to accept this task God has called you to do.” The angel knows that Mary is already one very strong woman. So when she says, ““Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word,” she says it with a brave confidence.

The conversation with the angel would be proof enough of Mary’s strength, but she does not just carry the Word of God, she proclaims the Word of God. In verses 46 through 55 we find a song Mary sings that is sometimes called the Magnificat. The name comes from the opening lines in Latin: *Magnificat anima mea Dominum*. My soul magnifies the Lord...

Mary’s song is not a gentle lullaby to put a sweet baby to sleep. No, it is a political manifesto to start a rebellion. All the latest heroines in the Star Wars movie and their uprising against the evil First Order Empire have nothing on Mary singing this song. Her intention is to pull down the political and economic system. To give you an idea of the power of this song, in some parts of South America back in the ‘50s and ‘60s, Catholic bishops prohibited their priests from reading the Magnificat in worship services. These bishops wanted to preserve the existing political structures and they believed that Mary’s song sounded too much like Communist propaganda. If that seems farfetched, listen again to some of the lines...

My spirit rejoices in God my Savior for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant... The Mighty One has done great things for me...

He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts... brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly

He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty... Scattered the proud... Brought down the powerful from their thrones... Sent the rich away empty... Meanwhile lifting up the lowly... hmm... That doesn't sound like something written in a Christmas card. It sounds more like an op-ed piece on the Silence Breakers. The proud and the powerful who thought they could use the lowly for their own selfish pleasures are now being scattered, brought down from their thrones, and sent away empty.

The Mighty One has done great things. Because of the new life growing within her, Mary can envision a whole new world. She dreams of a world where everything is turned around and upside down. It is a world where the rich no longer grow richer due to massive corporate tax breaks while those who work long hard hours on the minimum wage do not make enough to feed themselves and put a roof over their heads. Instead she dreams of a world where no one is hungry, no one is homeless, everyone has adequate medical care. She dreams of a world where those who desperately hold on to power feel it all slip between their fingers until they have nothing. She dreams of a world where no one is afraid, where everyone is welcome, everyone has value; where there are no borders and border walls, there are no insiders and outsiders, no us versus them. She dreams of a world where those who think they can control and use others are brought down and those who are battered and abused and think they have no voice are lifted up and listened to. She longs for a world of healing and wholeness, a world of justice and peace, a world the way God intends it to be. And all I can say is, "Me too, Mary, me too..."

I don't know about you but I don't have much time for the Christmas card Mary, sweet and innocent, meek and mild. I much prefer Mary the Revolutionary, Mary the Prophet, the Mary that Luke writes about. This is a Mary who is worth listening too. This is a Mary who brings good news. This is a Mary who brings light into a world that so often seems completely dark. And this is a Mary that challenges us. When she says with bold confidence, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word," we can only hope we would have the courage to say, "Me too." May we listen to the voice of God's prophets who bring us the Word of the Lord. May we be brave enough to take up the tasks God gives us to do. May we have faith enough to hold on to God's promise that the world is about to turn. Thanks be to God. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.