

DECEMBER 7, 2025

Sermon Text Luke 1: 26-40 (ESV)

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, **27** to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. **28** And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" **29** But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. **30** And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. **31** And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. **32** 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 father David, **33** and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

34 And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" **35** And the angel answered 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 called holy—the Son of God. **36** And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. **37** For nothing will be impossible with God." **38** And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

39 In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, **40** and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

Sermon Title: "Even in Our Fear, We are Called Forward"

When has a totally life-changing experience happened to each of you? Maybe meeting your future spouse, and deciding to go on in life as a couple? It may have been the death of a parent when you were at a young age, or the death of a spouse later in life. The birth of a child, divorce, a life-threatening medical diagnosis. These can be the events that stop us in our tracks, change the picture in our mind of what our life is or will be. They are not just events that form who we are; they are events that transform who we can be.

The presence of Mary, Jesus' mother in the God-with-us story, is one that Christians around the world are exploring today in this season of Advent. She was a young woman according to the story in Luke, who by the norms of Middle Eastern Jewish culture at that time for getting engaged would have been around 14 years of age. That context already is unsettling, because in today that's defined as a child. She'd been promised in marriage to a man, probably anywhere from 8 to 20 years older than herself, and she was raised far from the cultural exposure, economic hustle-bustle, and

awe-inspiring walls of the Temple that were a part of living in Jerusalem, that she may have only visited for a high holy day. She lived in Nazareth, Luke tells us. A little backwater village, that would have had a synagogue that served as both site of Sabbath worship and education on the Torah; a small market center; and homes housing 2-3 generations of a family. Maybe just a little over 100 people at the most lived in Nazareth. People moved into Nazareth due to marriage – finding a bride for a son, or husband for a daughter, from a nearby village. But most were born and died there. This “dot” on the map wasn’t known for anything special; later one student of this young woman’s son would awkwardly blurt out, “Nazareth? Has anything good ever come out of *that* place?”

This young woman knew everything that was going to occur in her life by watching the women of her village. She knew what to expect when the marriage was finalized by the families and when the local rabbi blessed it. She knew what to expect from the celebration and feast they would have to mark the occasion, maybe with extended family living in other villages coming for the week of the festivities. She could picture in her mind eventually starting a family with this man she had been promised to, hopefully with a son or two to gain everyone’s approval. She might have helped already in the major life event of females, when aunts and sisters and cousins went through the birthing process. There weren’t big surprises in Nazareth, except from how death arrived: whether advanced age, or a snake bite, a fever and infection, or a difficult baby delivery resulted in loss of life. Mary’s life was laid out for her; she could see everything that was ahead for her in observing the lives of the fellow Nazarites living around her.

When the supernatural appearance of a man came before her while she was alone, it would have been startling just in his appearance – since it wasn’t easy for women to be alone and, women did not spend time alone with men outside their family. When he introduced himself by name and origin – Gabriel, a messenger from God – the strangeness of his greeting: “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” was enough to bring not just puzzlement, but rising uneasiness. This strange appearance alone was enough to make her mouth go dry, her pulse race, a loud roar of fear overwhelm her hearing. Gabriel detected her growing discomfort, and so he acknowledged her emotional state and reassured her, “Do not fear.” But his next words wiped out any comfort that reassurance might have given, by telling her she was conceiving a boy child, and gave her the name she should give this child, the males of the family. He told her that she was specifically selected for this task of giving birth to a child that would resume the dynasty of the great king of old, David, which usually came through the father. And that messenger from God said this baby would grow up to reign over the people of Israel forevermore.

Something in this proclamation from this heavenly stranger made Mary realize this wasn't something that would be happening later in her life, after her marriage to Joseph was finalized and blessed, after the village blessed their new union, after they had set up a household together. And from what she has learned from the biological processes of the women she has been around, she asks a logical question: "This doesn't make any sense; this isn't possible." And the messenger lets her know it is possible, and to convince her it's possible the angel shares the news of another miraculous event in her family, the pregnancy of her cousin Elizabeth, stating "You see Mary? Nothing will be impossible with God." And with that, she seems to accept the news. Her faith tells her she is to be subservient to God; so she acquiesces to this transformative change in her predictable life.

But then, we are told "she arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, ... and entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth." Why did she leave in the immediate days after? Maybe her parents, upon her sharing of this mysterious news, realized the possible consequences to a young unmarried woman in the Middle East, and sent her to Zechariah and Elizabeth for her safety. Women were stoned for having sexual relations outside of marriage, which is what the villagers of Nazareth would have assumed. Maybe the news finally, really, sank in and the reality of her situation started bringing back that initial fear, so she went to the one person that could relate to this divine imposition on her life expectations, the other woman Gabriel named as experiencing an impossibility, the woman past childbearing years miraculously carrying a child. Either way, she moved forward into this new reality, into this transformed future that she didn't ask for but accepted with her words "I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word," those words that she followed up with action as she took the risky trip alone to get a glimpse of what her transformed future might look like.

The story of the events surrounding the birth of our Savior is as mysterious as the Triune God Jesus the Christ is a part of, as mysterious as the creative acts of God, as mysterious as the movement of the Holy Spirit. Even hearing this story again, as finite humans we can't quite wrap our minds around the ways of the infinite divine. The mystery of the Incarnation; the mystery of Jesus' birth; the mystery of God's way of communicating this news to the young, frightened woman who was selected for this earth-defying job assignment – it's pretty incomprehensible. And the more difficult something is to understand, when the mysterious occurs in our life, the mystery can bring on fear – just like it did Mary.

Artist and author Scott Erickson, in his devotional book *Honest Advent*, explores the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ through 25 short essays. In one of them he states this about the mystery of the Incarnation: "(it's) the divine and the human intertwined,

the human birth that wasn't quite human, the improbable womb that nurtured and gave life to the Godhead, the miraculous revelations that surrounded the arrival of the Christ child. Mystery isn't understandable ... or it wouldn't be a mystery." Erickson goes on to say: "At the heart of the Christ story, starting with Christmas, is a mystery. The paradox *is* Jesus being fully God and fully human – two seemingly contradictory truths existing in the same space and time." This mystery captures the hearts and minds of millions of believers throughout the centuries, throughout the world. And that mystery starts out of a paradoxical mystery – how the Finite human and the Infinite Godhead wove together the salvation of creation in the belly of a poor, 14 year old, Middle Eastern woman. The Incarnation was another act of creation, by the Godhead that originally formed us out of the dust of the earth, breathing the Spirit into us so that we can partner with God in co-creating God's kin-dom in relationship to God and each other. God created us, and continues to re-create us.

There are many ways we see creating and creation revealed all around us. Creation comes in three ways: in formation, reformation, and finally in transformation. Formation is the first act of creating. It's the way something is structured or arranged. Geological formations, something I saw when I visited Sleeping Bear National Park a month ago. The sports formations we see the UM or Lions offensive line setting up on the line of scrimmage. We formed a way of governing ourselves in the United States, "in order to form a more perfect union." We believe we were formed by God, our bones and tissues and organs physically, along with the Spirit that enlivens us emotionally and spiritually, "fearfully and wonderfully made."

Reformation is the act of making changes to improve something that was previously formed. Breaking apart the prefix from the root word – we are re-forming something. The potter that wets the clay back into a lump to re-form the pot or plate or vase to better realize the final product they see in their mind's eye. The sports team that trades out and brings in a few new players to re-form what they hope to accomplish together through wins on the court or field or rink. The period in church history called the Reformation set the goal to improve the church of the time, now called the Catholic church, to correct the abuses that many inside it had seen evolve in its governance. Eventually, this re-formation expanded to new ways of describing God, living together and governing ourselves in the churches that came to be called Protestant. Within the Reformed movement, we formed a church around the presbyterian way of polity, our way of governing ourselves through representation and delegated leadership tasks and shared decision-making.

Human beings can create. We can make formation and reformation happen. But, transformation is one step further. Transformation is a thorough or dramatic change in form or appearance, sometimes an extreme, radical change, a metamorphosis. The

change from a caterpillar to a butterfly is not a reformation – it is a transformation, in which the body of the caterpillar literally dissolves, and the cells rearrange themselves to form a completely new creature, looking nothing like the creature it’s transformed out of. In a human life, transformation is a complete remaking of all aspects of that life, of who we thought we were and what we can become. And this takes the action of the divine.

Recently, as part of a hiring process I am participating in with the Presbytery, I was honored to listen to the transformation story of one human being. This person had a career with increasing levels of scope and responsibility. But in his last organization, he realized its goals just didn’t feel like a fit him any longer, and he decided to begin a new job hunt. But then – his life turned upside down. Before he could find another job, his company went through a major layoff and he was one of the workers impacted. And right on the heels of this – his wife died, leaving him without a life partner, another income source to the family, and young children to raise alone. He described piecing together contract jobs to support the family, but also to prioritize his role as father. He said in the interview “I look at work completely differently now; the financial aspect of it has taken a secondary role to how it adds meaning to the world and my life. I’m looking to make a difference, versus just looking to make a living.”

In his story, I heard all of the key points that occur in the mystery of personal transformation. First, there’s an internal shift, something that makes you start examining the world you are living in. Next, a catalyst in your life completes the opening within you, creating an avenue for new thought patterns to be placed within you. For him, loss of job and loss of life partner were two cataclysmic events. Continuing the process of personal transformation is the initiation of holistic growth – it’s not just in one element of life that begins to change, but personal transformation encompasses everything: your mental fitness, emotional health, physical well being, and creates a deeper self-understanding at the other side of the change. Fourth, the transformed human has a change in their mindset – as a result you’re more adaptable, you live in a growth mindset instead of a scarcity mindset, and you can engage in deeper introspection. Following that are behavioral shifts, the ways others can externally start to see and feel the transformation in you – you have a new vocabulary for defining success, new ways of achieving life goals. You relate to others in your life in new ways. And finally, personal transformation creates new identity and purpose. The transformed person has redefined their self-worth. All of these aspects of the process of personal transformation are going forward in hope, seeing in the future more meaningful ways to live.

Scott Erikson wrote, “Your transformation throughout life will be a paradox. One truth is YOU have agency to make decisions to change and (re)form the parts you wish.

The choice to do daily situps and the choice to refrain from a bowl of ice cream in front of the TV every night. Gratitude and thankfulness are choices you can make to transform your perspective in every situation you find yourself in. You have a choice But – there are other parts of your transformation that are like a virgin birth, in the way that you’re not in charge of any of it.” Our willed action isn’t the driver in true transformation. Erickson goes on to say “It’s less about your mustering up the strength to accomplish something and more about being open to the transformation God wants to do in you. It begins quietly and deeply within you.”

Reflecting upon the Annunciation, the revelation by Gabriel of Mary’s role in the Incarnation of God in the birthing of our Savior Jesus Christ, we see and hear a profound change being initiated. It’s not just Mary being re-formed as a vessel to bring forth God-with-us; in the Incarnation, her whole life and being was transformed. And so this story is not just about how Jesus came to be – because the mystery of the Incarnation cannot be completely explained. It will always remain a little incomprehensible to us. Instead, this story gives hope about what can come out of the journey from our own fears, and the hope that going forward can give us in transforming our own lives. Erikson asks us to ponder: “But, this is the place where God begins new life. And newness of life is what we all desire This is the work the Spirit began in Mary, and this is the work the Spirit is wanting to do in the soul womb of all humanity – to bring Christ’s participation into fullness within you. To bring YOU into the fullness of the participatory life of Christ.” The mystery of God’s work within us isn’t just working on ourselves – it’s accepting God’s work on our lives and within us, to help one-by-one bring all of us closer to God’s kin-dom being realized here on earth.

“‘For nothing will be impossible with God’ was the answer Mary received from the messenger when she asked about the mystery: How can this happen? How is this even possible? We receive the same answer about the mysterious transformation of our own lives. Most of us will not have an angel announce words clearly to us. Sometimes we hear that transformation as we look over our shoulder running down the road. But all of us CAN whisper back the statement that God is wanting, an acceptance of God’s desire to do deep transformation and restoration work within us. We can whisper back: ‘Let it be to me according to your word.’” Use this Advent season to run ahead into the changes God has placed in your life, accept them, and in hope let them transform you into the creation God transforming you to be.
Amen.