

“The Fear of Hopelessness” // Luke 1:26–38 // Do Not Be Afraid #2

CMO Announcement

Our mission as a church is not just to grow our church, but to bless our city, and because of your incredible generosity over the last couple of years, we were able to give half a million dollars to get ReCity getting off the ground... and get them a facility

Another one of our missions is to see the gospel spread throughout world, and so each Christmas we give a gift of three or four hundred thousand dollars to the International Mission Board... the agency through whom we send out of most of our overseas planters.

Just this week I got a note from our team leader in India, Jesse, who said: This year our team has trained hundreds of national partners in a year-long Biblical studies program. We meet monthly with these men for teaching on Bible, family, and church planting. In order to graduate from this program, the men are required to not only pass the exams, but 3 of their disciples must also pass, and they have to start 2 new churches. In one district in the eastern part of our state, 18 of these program graduates have started 62 new churches in the last 3 years! (We are seeing) the book of Acts happen again in central India!”

*Don't you want to support that? December is a time everyone gives generously. We are hoping that, **by the end of December, we can get to \$33million in All-In giving.... but if we can go above that amount, we are going to give the first 100K to the IMB.***

*So, again, I want to challenge you to think about being involved generously in the mission of God this December. **Set yourself a benchmark** and try to try to reach it. **For years my family and I have been saying** that we want to give the largest gift every Christmas to Jesus. **Ask God to help you grow** in the generosity of your spirit and love for the mission.*

DPAC: 2 kinds of people.

Intro

BIBLE... AT ALL CAMPUSES... We're in a short series called **Do Not Be Afraid** in which we are looking at three “fear not” statements in the Gospel of Luke surrounding the birth of Jesus. Luke is showing us **how the birth of Jesus** addresses some of our most primal fears.

- **Christmas, while it is a time of joy**, for some is time when fears and hurts come to the surface.

Last week Pastor Chris talked about the fear of disappointment... *and the fear of snakes. Don't know if you saw this last Sunday...* the Discovery Channel put on a special about a guy who zipped himself up in a special **Teflon suit** so that he could be the first human swallowed live by an anaconda. You see that? Who does that?

An anaconda, of course, is the largest snake in the world; it can grow to be up to 35 feet long and can swallow a 350 lb animal whole.

Reminded me of something I shared with you a few years ago that supposedly appeared in a **Peace Corps** manual training volunteers serving in the Amazon... Probably more of an urban legend...¹ But it is instructions on how to react if you are attacked by an anaconda. Here's supposedly what it said:

1. **Don't run.** (They say the anaconda is fast enough to catch you. I say, let the anaconda prove it. And if I am with somebody else, I

¹ http://urbanlegends.about.com/od/snakes/a/snake_attack.htm

don't have to be faster than the anaconda, I just have to be faster than the other guy. No greater love.)

2. *Lie supine and keep arms close to your side and your legs together.*
3. *Tuck your chin in*
4. *The snake will come and begin to nudge you and climb over your body.*
5. *Do not panic.* (Do not panic? Do not *panic*? If ever God designed panic for a situation, this would be that situation.)
6. *The snake will probably begin to swallow you from the feet end first. Do not try to resist. At this stage it is especially important not to panic.*
7. *The snake will begin to suck your legs into its body. This will take a long time. You must lie perfectly still during this whole process.*
8. *When the snake has reached your knees, slowly, and with as little movement as possible, reach down, take your knife, and very gently insert it into the snake's mouth between its mouth and your leg. Then suddenly rip upward and sever its head.*
9. *Be sure you have your knife.*

There are good fears and there are bad fears. Good fears save your life; bad fears paralyze and destroy it. **Last weekend** Pastor Chris showed us how Zechariah's fear of disappointment immobilized him... caused him to disbelieve and almost miss what God had for him.

This weekend we are going to look at a similar **fear, felt by the Virgin Mary herself**—but one she overcame. It is the fear of hopelessness.

*Let's get a definition of hope: Hope (in the Christian sense) is the expectation of future blessings and the confidence that the best is yet to come.*²

We have many people in our community this weekend living without hope.

² Adapted from James MacDonald.

- People asking, **“Am I ever going to be happy again?”**
- Maybe you've suffered some **setback in your job, your health, or your career...** and it feels so final. You wonder if there's anything else to look forward to? **You've gone through a divorce;** a rough time with your family...
- Recent events in our nation have made doubt whether there is any hope for justice or harmony in our society.

These are all very legitimate questions. In this message you will see how Mary faced, and overcame the fear of hopelessness, and how you can, too.

Luke 1:26–38

[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.

Question: *Why* is Mary troubled (afraid)?

- **Well, the obvious answer is that she just saw an angel.** Angels in the Bible don't appear as the **chubby, harmless-looking adolescents** floating around in **togas with toy bow and arrows** the way we depict them in pop culture. Angels in the Bible are towering, majestic, warriors whose first words are always, “Wait.. don't die!” *Maybe that's why he says, “Do not fear?”*
- **I'm sure the sight** of the angel was overwhelming to her, but Luke specifically says that she was **troubled at the angel's saying**, his greeting, **“O favored one.”**
 - *“Who am I,” she asks, “for you to show up in all your heavenly glory, telling me I am someone special?”*

- Imagine if in the **middle of this church service** we heard the sound of sirens and helicopters and the secret service stormed in and said, “Sorry to interrupt, but the President has asked to speak with...” and said your name? “We have a matter of urgent national security...” “Me? Who am I? Why all this attention for me?”
- **Mary is saying, “Who am I that God sent his top level** secret service—who knows my name and calls me ‘the favored one’?” It’s frightening.

[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?”

Now... Is Mary’s question a question of doubt? Kind of. She says, “I’m a virgin, and virgins don’t generally have babies, God.”

Isn’t this the same kind of question that got Zech in trouble? Gabriel told Zechariah that he and his wife would have a son... the problem of course, was they were both *octogenarians*, and Zechariah had said, “How can I know this to be true? I am no spring chicken myself and my wife... she’s old.” For that doubt Gabriel put Zechariah into timeout for 9 months. **Yet look what happens to Mary:**

[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.”

Mary got an explanation. Z got put into timeout; Mary got an explanation. Why? Had Zechariah just gotten the grumpy angel? No, it’s Gabriel both times. Maybe he hadn’t had his morning coffee yet?

Of course not. It’s because **there are two kinds of doubts:** Bad doubt and good doubt.

There is a kind of **doubt that grows out of disbelief.**

- It is **proud and defiant**. It looks inward at itself, in bitterness, and says to the promises of God, “*There’s no way this could be true.*” That was Zechariah.

Then there is a **doubt that grows out of a humble wonder.**

- It stares upward with awe, and says, “*How can these things be true? I don’t understand, God, but I am ready to learn.*” That was Mary.

Tim Keller calls it the difference between **dishonest doubt** and **honest doubt**. **Dishonest doubt, he says,** is proud and lazy...

- It responds to God’s revelation by saying ‘*that’s impossible*’ (or in its more contemporary version, ‘*that’s just silly*’) and then walks away. Those statements of course, are **not arguments, they are just assertions.**
- **Dishonest doubt is close-minded;** it refuses to consider the possibility whose purposes and power are far beyond it’s own comprehension.

By contrast, **honest doubts, he says, are humble, because they lead you to ask genuine questions, not just put up a defiant wall.**

- When you ask a **real** question, you see, it puts you in a position of humility and vulnerability.
- **Humility:** there’s something you don’t know.
- **What if God gives you an answer? And what if that answer contradicts you, shatters your categories, or demands things from you that you feel like you are not ready to give yet?**
- **Honest doubts are open to belief.**

You see, if you are really asking God—from humble doubt—for insight into who he is and what he does, he just might give to you.

- **Here is what is awesome to me:** In answer to Mary’s honest, humble doubt, the angel gives her one of the greatest, faith-building statement in all of the Bible—one that has brought more comfort to me in my doubts than any other statement: **‘For nothing will be impossible with God’ (Luke 1: 37)**. I can’t tell you how many times I have thought about that statement.
- **Well, the only reason we get this extra revelation is because Mary asked the doubting question.** *If you doubt honestly and humbly, you will become a person to whom God imparts more of the mysteries of faith—which will bless not only you—but others after you!*³
- **Doubt is a foot poised...** can go backwards into unbelief, but never go forwards without picking up foot.

Many of you have doubts: “God, why would you...” And, “Why is the world like this?”

- **My question: Are your doubts humble?** Are they open to the possibility of a God who might give you uncomfortable answers?
- Or here’s a way of saying it. You have doubts. Are you willing to doubt your doubts? Or are they so firmly fixed in your mind that you have closed your mind to a God who might contradict them?
 - For many of the most cynical people, the one thing they don’t doubt is their doubts...

Get this: Top 2 reasons people lose their faith:

- Pain: that we have gone through; their inability to accept that a good God could allow it to happen.
- Desire for sexual freedom

³ Portions of these paragraphs about doubt and faith are adapted from Tim Keller’s message on Zechariah and Mary, Luke 1:1–38.

These things are not rational arguments, of course, but things that close our minds to the possibility of all-powerful, all-wise, all-ruling God. THE PROBLEM IS NOT THE DOUBT, you see, IT IS THE proud and self-centered HEART BEHIND THE DOUBTS.

- **Be willing to doubt your doubts. That’s what Mary did.**

[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.

Mary then composed a song, in which she rejoices in the promises God has made to her. So, using her as our example, let’s talk about...

How We Overcome the Fear of Hopelessness

1. Understand the favor of God

The angel started his command to Mary to not fear by announcing to her that she had the favor of God. This is important, because it is the key to everything else.

What is the favor of God? I have heard a TV preacher talk about it as getting a good **parking space**... “Jesus loves me!”; the house you’ve always wanted going into **foreclosure** and you buying it for a steal. Your kids get **straight A’s**. Every time you smile your **teeth gleam**. Is that how you think of it?

Think for a minute about the situation Mary is in:

- She has just been told she is going to be pregnant with no husband in **a culture where this is not only frowned upon** but punishable by death.
- The **man she loves, Joseph**, is probably not going to understand the situation and will probably leave her.
- She is **already poor**... if Joseph rejects her she’ll be destitute. She might have to beg. *(If she really had the favor of God, why didn’t the angel just stroke her a check before he left... that’s probably*

what I would have asked: “While I have you here... could I get the next round of lottery numbers?”)

- She is **financially insolvent**; she has a **ruined reputation**; her **most important relationship** is falling apart.

Yet she rejoices in the favor of God. How?

Because a Son is being born to her... **a Son, the angel says, whose name you will call “Jesus,”** “because he will save his people from their sins.”⁴

- What if her main problem was not finances or a bad reputation, but a severed relationship with God... and Jesus was coming to restore that.
- The fact that her pregnancy essentially puts her under a curse of death is supposed to be a picture for us... Jesus was born to a woman under the curse of death. We, the whole human race, were under the curse of death and Jesus was born to us and would grow up to take that curse their place.
- Gospel in 4 words: Jesus in my place. FROM THE VERY BEGINNING. PAINTING

This Son, the angel says, will not only will he save his people from their sins, he will rule from the throne of David (vs 32): To the Jews, David’s throne symbolized the restoration of worldwide peace and blessing... a condition called “**shalom.**”

- ***We long to see the curse removed from the world.***
- ***We have pain: he will reverse it.***
 - My Bible reading this week. Joel: “I will restore what the swarming locusts have eaten...” (2:25) NOT *JUST* FORGIVE
 - **Isaiah 60:4**, they will bring back your sons and daughters from afar... grieved parent.
 - Job: receives 7 sons back: in eternity
 - **Bodies destroyed by disease will leap and run in perfect health.**

⁴ Luke 1:31; Matthew 1:21

- **Reputations that have been ruined are restored.** Wrongs made right.
- **JRRT: “All the sad things come ‘untrue.’”** The wording of that is strange, on purpose. Tolkien didn’t mean we’ll forget they happened, just that the feeling of loss and permanent damage will be removed.
- **And what’s more, we’ll see is that God was actually using our pain for good!**
 - Because Mary went through these things—an unjust death sentence, hardship that seemed impossible, she got to understand Jesus more by going through what he went through and by seeing that nothing was impossible with him.
 - He reversed it. He used it for good.
- ***We have pain: he will reverse it. We have disappointment: he will erase it.***
 - **In vs. 36 the angel brings back up Elizabeth’s barrenness.** Why?
 - If you recall, as Pastor Chris explained, for a woman to die barren represented one of the most devastating disappointments in life.
 - Part of the lead-up to the birth of Jesus is an elderly, barren woman getting pregnant because the birth of Jesus is God’s promise to erase our deepest disappointments.
 - **BTW, don’t miss that the birth of Jesus is surrounded by two miracles of birth:**
 - That the baby was born from virgin shows that God’s salvation won’t come through any effort on man’s part—it is entirely a power and gift from on high. **Name shall be called holy. (vs. 35)**
 - That Jesus’ birth was accompanied by another baby being born to a disappointed, barren woman show that one day this baby will erase every disappointment.
 - **A lot of people have a “bucket list.”** I do. The usual things

- Inca trail
- Streaking at the Super Bowl
- Meeting Nic Cage and co-starring in the next Left Behind
- *You know... things on everyone's bucket list*
- The idea behind a bucket list... I need to do these before I die because YOLO... what if you die without experiencing these things?
- **For some, what would be on that list is not 'glib' at all: it's not about a trip to the Grand Canyon, but getting married. Having children. Being financially comfortable. Feeling good healthy wise.**
- **I have a bucket list... but I don't take my bucket list that seriously...** In the resurrection, under the reign of the Son of David, every disappointment will be fulfilled.
- *"I will restore what the swarming locusts have eaten... the sons and daughters lost in this life will be brought again from afar; once again my people will eat and be satisfied and they will never again be put to shame."⁵*
- **We have pain: he will reverse it. We have disappointment: he will erase it. We yearn for justice: he will restore it.**
 - We go through seasons like the ones we've just gone through with Ferguson, NYC... and a lot of people ask, *Will there ever be justice?* Some say, "Where is the justice for the families of the victims?" Others say, "Where is the justice for the police officers and their families?"
 - That perfect justice will be restored when Jesus rules from the throne of David.
 - That's not to excuse working for justice now; it just means that down here justice will always be imperfect; sometimes terribly skewed.
 - Maybe you say, "Why do the **wicked go unpunished?**" "Why do the hypocrites prosper?"
 - Maybe **you've been wronged...**

- *The angel says, "Have hope... the Son has been born to sit on David's throne."*

I know that for many the Christmas season represents a time where they feel pain, loss, and disappointment more acutely...

Hope is the expectation of future blessings and the confidence that the best is yet to come.

That hope is found in embracing the favor of God given to you in Christ. WHAT IS THE FAVOR OF GOD? He has restored your relationship, promised you restoration of all things, working all for good now.

*God's favor isn't always easy... sometimes, as with Mary, it includes a lot of difficulties; but it's always good because it brings to you **all the promises and presence** of Jesus.*

2. Doubt with faith

- **Ask questions**, but be open to answers. **Stare upward** in wonder.
- **Meditate on that phrase: "Nothing is impossible with God."** Your life would change.
 - Think about the size of God.
 - So big he speaks the universe into existence. In that one statement, "Let there be light," he designed the complexity of the atom; the principles of quantum physics He stretched out the universe as far as all its light years. How great is his power! How high his understanding above ours! How sure is his Word!
 - **Then say, "Nothing is impossible with God!"**
- What promise do you have trouble believing? Junk mail?
 - Ps 23:6?
 - Is 43:2?
 - Rom 8:28?
 - Jer 29:13?
 - Rom 8:35
 - Rom 8:32—he that did not spare his own Son...?

⁵ Joel 2:25–26

- **Look at size, and then say, “Nothing is impossible with you, God.”**
- **Does that phrase “doubt with faith” seem like a contradiction to you?** It’s not.
- **Faith has to do** with the posture of your heart behind those doubts.
- **So stare into your doubts, then into the face of God, realizing his size, and** the greatness of his love, and ask your questions.
- Leave room a God whose power and wisdom are far above your own and search the Scriptures to see what his answer might be.
- **Doubt like Mary, not Zechariah**

3. Surrender it all

- The angel, even though he brought really good news, demanded full surrender from Mary.
 - **For example, he tells Mary what Jesus’ name will be.** Usually parents get to name their children, right? That’s a very important symbol: It’s your child; you assign a name to it based on what you hope for the child. It’s yours.
 - The **angel said, “Not this one.** God calls the shots with this one.”
 - **This is a picture for us:** If you are going to have the blessing of Jesus in your life, then we have got to surrender fully and let God call the shots, even in our most intimate relationships and our deepest dreams.
- **Mary’s response:** “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” (1:38) Servant: I have nothing. It’s all yours. Let it be to me according to your will and your word.

You can only be in 1 of 2 positions to Jesus: full surrender or rebellion.

- **You can’t negotiate your way into the favor of God.** A lot of people do that... I’ll be good. I’ll give this. I’ll shape up here.
 - There was a guy in the Bible, Saul... “To obey is better than sacrifice.”
 - ONLY 2 POSTURES
- *There’s only one deal that God will make: all of Jesus for full and complete control of your life.*

Hope is found in knowing you have the favor of God in Christ.

So I don’t know what situation you are in. Maybe you are in a Mary-like situation. I can tell you that if you have opened up your heart to receive Christ, everything the angel said to Mary applies to you.

So believe it! Don’t just give mental assent to it, ponder it:

“But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.” (Luke 2:19)

Ponder it until it completely reshapes all of your thinking:

- I heard an example this week: *Imagine you get **notice that a relative you didn’t know existed had left you something in his will** and that it has been directly deposited in your savings account. You assume, because you never knew this guy, it is a token amount—a couple hundred dollars, and so you don’t even go to check it. You pay no attention to this savings account and keep struggling to make ends meet, until a couple years later you glance at this account and realize he has left you 100 million dollars. All this time, you had it; you just weren’t living with the awareness of it.*⁶
- I am like that with what I have in Jesus. It’s not that I don’t know it... I just don’t *feel it*. So, I pray, “God, help me to *know* what I already know. Until it reshapes my emotions.
 - **...Until all the disappointments and pain and injustices** of the world get swallowed up in the hope of what I have in you.
 - **...Until I willingly take my hands off of all** that I have because of what I have in you.

⁶ Tim Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*, ch. 11, pp. 168, 173–75.

- *....Until I can say, from the depths of my heart: In Christ, I can give up all that I have; because, in Christ, I already have all that I need!*
- **Until I burst into song**, in my hour of my death, when my relationships crumble; when I feel destitute: and say: I will not fear; I have favor; every promise is yes in Christ Jesus.

Conclusion:

That's found in a very simple prayer:

Mary's Prayer:

"Behold, I am your servant; let it be to me according to your word."

"I embrace your favor in Christ, and I know that nothing is impossible with you." (1:30, 37–38)

Can you think of a better prayer to pray this season? Pray that now?

Invitation:

- Have you ever received Christ? It is my privilege to tell you that all that the angel offered to Mary, I can offer to you. You are highly favored. Jesus has come to forgive your sins if you will surrender and receive.
- (Mary did not have favor because she was sinless, but because of what her Son would do for her in her place, that he has done for you, too.)