

“A Servant of the Lord”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Luke 1: 26-38

I hate going to the dentist. Perhaps some of you can identify with that sentiment. The truth is, we have a wonderful dentist – Dr. John McFadden. He’s so wonderful that we drive to Martinsville to be seen by him. He and his staff are friendly, caring, and thoughtful, and even better, he is covered by Debbie’s dental insurance. I do like to give him a hard time, though. For a while it seemed like every time he discovered I needed a filling replaced or something more than routine cleaning, he and his wife were expecting a child. Made me wonder if that was his strategy for college savings!

Despite Dr. McFadden being a wonderful dentist, I still hate going twice a year. Maybe it’s knowing that someone has these sharp metal objects picking around my teeth and gums. Maybe it’s knowing I will be chastised for not flossing. Maybe it’s knowing I am completely helpless as I sit there in that chair, head back, mouth open, and someone is poking all around in there.

It never fails what happens when I sit down in that dentist’s chair. When the hygienist begins to do her work, my body tenses up. My jaw gets rigid, my arms go tense, my hands grab on to the rails of the chair, and my legs become stiff. I even notice that my breathing gets slower, sometimes even to the point where I hold my breath! It’s all sub-conscious – I don’t realize I’m doing it, until I hear this voice saying, “Mr. Mansell, you need to relax.” I apologize to the hygienist – well, as best I can apologize with my mouth open and full of her dental equipment – and I begin to feel my body release its tension. It’s a fascinating yet predictable response I have every time I go to the dentist.

Probably on a sub-conscious level, this reaction is my body fighting or protecting itself from what it perceives as a threat. It’s known as the “fight or flight” response. Our brain tells us that if we feel threatened in some way, we need to either fight what is threatening us, or flee away from the perceived threat. The image that came to my mind, and which I shared with the bible study group on Tuesday, is that of a closed fist. When we close our fists, it’s symbolic of how we protect ourselves from any threats that might harm us. The tighter the fist, the harder it is to penetrate what’s at our core.

As I read through this familiar story of the annunciation, I couldn’t help but notice that Mary gradually opens herself up to God’s word and will through her conversation with the angel. I shared the following outline of this passage with the bible study on Tuesday, and as I walk

through this with you, notice how Mary's countenance or receptiveness changes from being closed to being open.

Luke begins with an introduction for this encounter between Mary and God's messenger (1:26-27). It is a very specific introduction, which highlights the validity of God's plan of incarnation. It includes a declaration of the time (the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy), place (Nazareth), person (a virgin), relationship and lineage (Joseph of the house of David). This is not some random act by God; it is specific, intentional, and will ultimately reflect the depth of God's purpose for sending Christ into our lives.

After this introduction, you have a back-and-forth dialogue between the angel and Mary. The angel greets Mary: "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." When we hear "favored one" today, it might stir in us various reactions. On the one hand, we might feel we are favored because we have accomplished a task or done a good job, so we are favored in someone else's eyes. On the other hand, as we discussed Tuesday, for someone to be called "favored" might create envy on the part of another, say a sibling or co-worker. In this case, though, the angel is declaring that God has favored Mary simply for who she is, and that God is and will be with her through what is to come.

Notice Mary's reaction: it is not spoken, but is nonverbal. She was "perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be" (1:29). Another translation says Mary was "greatly troubled by his words" (NIV), likely reflecting what she must have felt: fear, confusion, and anxiety at what was happening. None of this was spoken, but her physical reaction to the angel must have looked similar to a fist closing in on itself.

The angel picks up on Mary's reaction. The first words out of the angel's mouth are: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God" (1:30). He reassures this teenaged girl that she has nothing to fear, for God is with her. Then he explains why he is there in the first place: "You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus" (1:31). They are words of comfort, reassurance, and promise of God's action through her, a child of God.

Now, notice Mary's response: "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" It is no longer fear and anxiety, but a question of logic and pragmatism. She's not married yet, only engaged to Joseph. The fist is loosening up somewhat, asking questions of how and explanation, now seemingly less-resistant to God's claim and call on her life.

The angel answers her question with trust and hope in the all-omnipotent God. "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" (1:35). The angel further reinforces the actions of God by stating that Mary's cousin, Elizabeth, is

in the sixth month of her pregnancy, something others said would never happen. And he concludes with the summary statement of faith: "For nothing will be impossible with God" (1:37).

Mary's response is no longer a closed-fist, but an open hand: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (1:38). At any point during this encounter, Mary could have said, "I'm out of here," and fled to safety, overwhelmed by what was being presented to her. Or she could have resisted, doubted, and closed herself up to protect her sense of emotional security. But she doesn't. She loosens her protective shell, and makes herself vulnerable to God's Word for her life.

And it's evident that it hasn't gone to her head. She could have easily said, "Here am I, the most favored one of the Lord." Instead, she proclaims, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord." She turns her whole self over to God for God's holy purposes, a sign of true humility in the face of unbelievable circumstances.

Are you walking through this Advent Season in a closed and defensive way, shielding yourself from threats so you won't be emotionally or spiritually wounded? Has that primary concern about your own mental well-being cut you off from your family, your friends, your church, your neighbors, your God? Do you notice that the first words out of your mouth these days are filled with negative, critical tones, rather than positive, hopeful tones?

I know it is hard to be vulnerable and open, both emotionally and spiritually. It is easier to keep our fists closed, our hearts shielded, our minds focused, and our souls rigid. When we are met by requests or ideas that seem unrealistic or unbelievable, it is easier to reject them as fantasy. In my life, the times that I have been most closed, most rigid, most defensive to not be wounded emotionally or spiritually, I have also realized afterwards that I was unable to hear God's voice during those times. I was unable to be comforted, to be reassured, to be inspired by God, even though God had been trying. Out of concern for my well-being, I not only shut out others, I shut out God.

One of the lasting lessons I have learned from my uncle, David Prince, who died two weeks ago, was to not be afraid to be vulnerable as a man or as a pastor. Whenever we would greet one another or say goodbye, David would always tell me he loved me and give me a kiss on the cheek. When he was serving as a pastor, he was not afraid to share with his parishioners the challenges he and my aunt, Nancy, had with their daughter, Jenny, who died in her late-twenties from the demons of substance abuse. He modeled for a generation of seminary students and pastors to be true to yourself and not cower behind expected appearances. For it is only in modeling that authenticity that you will develop the integrity God wishes to instill in each one of us.

It might appear at first easier to walk through life like a closed-fist, never wanting to expose yourself to mental, emotional, or spiritual hurt. The trouble with that strategy is that in the process of closing yourself off to perceived threats, you just might also close yourself off to God's voice, God's healing, and God's peace.

I am grateful to have had people in my life, such as my Uncle David, to model for me the importance of living life in an open and vulnerable way, for it is through those times that I have truly come closer to God in my walk of faith.

I am grateful that Mary responded in faith and not fear to the angel's announcement, for she reminds all of us how if we have hearts to trust and believe, nothing will be impossible for the Lord our God.

I am grateful that God loves us – whether our fists are closed or our hands are open – and how we are all witnesses to that love which arrives in a manger in Bethlehem this week.

“Here I am, a servant of the Lord.” Thanks be to God. Amen.