

Mary's fear and desperation (Luke 1:39-55)

Is it hard to obey the angel's command, "Do not be afraid"?

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"In those days, Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country."

Mary says yes, but that doesn't mean she successfully banishes her fear. We so often focus on Mary's faithful consent to "let it be with me according to your word." But perhaps this prevents us from fully imagining her struggle to heed the angel's reassuring command, "Do not be afraid."

I wonder if we find in Mary's haste to travel to the Judean hill country an ancient display of the fight-or-flight response, a physiological reaction humans and other mammals exhibit when faced with a perceived threat. I wonder what leads Mary to head for the hills—is it the overwhelming divine encounter itself? Or the sinking-in reality of its aftermath?

Mary has reason to be afraid. While Elizabeth's pregnancy would have been understood by her community as a miraculous sign of God's favor, Mary's would have been cause for alarm—cause, even, for her to be put to death. In Mary's context, an unmarried woman found to be pregnant fell subject to execution by stoning at the entrance of her father's house (Deuteronomy 22).

Under these circumstances, we might empathize with Mary's decision to put some distance between her newly pregnant body and her father's threshold. It's entirely

possible that Mary's flight to the hill country is urged on by her survival instinct.

Perhaps it is this undertone of desperation in Luke 1 that leads me to consider Mary a traveling companion of those who have made the heartbreaking decision to flee their beloved but dangerous homes in Central America. As asylum seekers and their children reach the southern border of the United States and are met with tear gas, rubber bullets, and manufactured fear, I cannot help but wonder if they would be treated differently if we imagined that Mary (and Jesus) were among their number.

The irony, of course, is that Jesus—quite unlike the members of the migrant caravan—is indeed a threat to our safety. Following him involves taking risks in order to love others more deeply, just as he did. When the Jesus on whom we wait this Advent encountered people who had been excluded, he took action to restore them to health and to participation in the life of the community.

If we aim to follow the Jesus whose birth we await this season, we will extend hospitality to strangers instead of building walls to keep them out. We will feed the hungry, tend the sick, and welcome little children instead of firing cans of tear gas at them.

When the fight-or-flight instinct gets the best of us and tells us to hunker down behind a wall of fear, I hope and pray that we will instead run with Mary to Elizabeth—to the arms of a faithful covenant community that will remind us of God's many blessings and embolden us to turn again toward home, toward the face of Jesus in the faces of those who have fled for their lives, toward the one whose messengers almost always begin with "Do not be afraid."