

# SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter  
Year A

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May 7, 2017

Text: Luke 1:26-38

Title: “Emerge: Coming Out—Leaving Comfortable Places”

I confess right from the start that I’m a bit embarrassed by this story and hesitate to tell it, but I’m going to risk it because I trust all of you not to laugh. Lynn was 6 or 7 months pregnant with our son, Josh, when we were living in a small town parsonage in Ohio where I was serving as a student pastor. I was upstairs in the bathtub enjoying a leisurely bath—relaxing--when I heard Lynn come up the stairs, went into the bedroom to do something—I don’t know what—and then started back down the stairs again. The house was quiet, so when she slipped on one of the steps near the bottom of the stairway I heard it loud and clear. She landed on the floor and I heard her moan and instinctively asked if she was okay. She said she thought so, but even before she answered I jumped out of the tub and ran down the same stairs myself and because I was the naked, soaking wet superhero ready to come to my wife’s aid, I slipped and fell down most of the bottom set of stairs myself and nearly landed on her. “Some hero” she said, or something like that. She started to laugh. I did too after I checked myself for broken parts.

Turned out, of course, that Josh was fine and so was Lynn but that experience was a reminder that pregnancy changes us. We’re different somehow. There is an expectation that changes how we feel and even act as we await the emergence of new life from the womb. And so it was for Mary as the Gospel According to Luke tells her story:

<sup>26</sup> In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”<sup>29</sup> But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup> The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup> And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> 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. <sup>33</sup> He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” <sup>34</sup> Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” <sup>35</sup> 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. <sup>36</sup> 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. <sup>37</sup> For nothing will be impossible with God.” <sup>38</sup> 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.

Life as God has created it is such an incredible gift. The expectation, the mystery of it all came into view with Mary as she learned of her pregnancy, as she began to come to terms with the gift of God that was now taking shape within her. This was an unexpected gift that resulted in great expectations. The One to whom she would give birth would become Savior, Messiah, Anointed One, Christ, Son of God, King of Kings: all those titles landed on Jesus, but that was all in the future. For now, this pregnancy is about unknowing and anxiety and hope. For now this pregnancy only held the promise of God. For now she had to wait until the promised future took shape in her womb. For now God was calling upon her to simply trust that “...nothing will be impossible with God” and that the One given to her would emerge from the darkness of the womb consistent with the same way in which he would one day emerge from the tomb. Jesus resurrection meant a fulfillment of what he said in John’s Gospel: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” (John 10:10)

But first, pregnancy. In order for Jesus to affect the world, it required birth, emerging from the safety and darkness of the womb. In order for Jesus to save lives, it required touching people others wouldn’t touch, crossing boundaries others wouldn’t cross, loving people others wouldn’t love, offering mercy to those others would not forgive, eating and drinking and sharing relationships with those many with whom the religious opponents would not share the time of day. In other words, the love of God was born out of the comfort of the womb when lives were at risk. God raised new life from the womb and the tomb in order to reveal to the world that the love of God does not play it safe and protect itself. But rather, God leaves the safe places in order to engage the world because people experience brokenness and a lack of meaning in life. Jesus came and comes still to proclaim over and over again that God’s desire is that you and I have life and have it abundantly.

I’ve been brought face to face with this truth repeatedly in the last few months. When Kris Wise called me about the burden God placed on his heart for those suffering from addictions, I really had no idea where it might lead but I trust that God’s Spirit is in such responses. When God lays a clear burden on someone’s heart for suffering people, that is a clear signal that is consistent with Jesus’ care for the suffering. As I’ve shared previously, as a result of that phone call the trustees and church council have supported hosting a Narcotics Anonymous group here. The concerned neighbors who share the passionate desire to turn the tide of the opioid epidemic we are facing are planning an event at Western High School for parents in order to address this very real threat to their children’s lives. Bracelets are being produced and sold by students of the SADD group to raise funds for the effort to save people’s lives.

As Jesus was born out of the comfort of the womb and later raised out of the death of the tomb, the Spirit of Christ calls us out of our places of comfort in order to reveal the power and presence of a loving God. When God places a burden on our hearts, it often means going places we did not expect to go and doing things we did not expect to be doing or even think we could

do. Ask Tamara Klida about One Week/One Street. Ask Kris or Liz Wise or Kris's mother, Tracy. Ask Jesus' mother Mary. The Spirit of God moves in the hearts of caring people and has the power to transform us in ways we never expected.

I want to close by sharing another story I'm hesitant to share. It doesn't involve leaving the comfort of a bathtub in response to concern for a pregnant wife. It involves a vision that is currently taking shape. It also involves comfort zones. Specifically mine and maybe yours, too. I hesitate to share it because I don't know exactly where it's going. It's still in the womb as it were, still taking shape, but somehow I trust God is in this, and I want to offer it to you and ask you to pray with me about it.

When I first came to town I noticed the empty buildings on the corner of Midland Street and Auburn Rd. and thought wouldn't that make a great little coffee shop? And then the idea came, wouldn't that be a great ministry of the church to open a non-profit coffee shop where people in the community could meet, a safe place, maybe have informal evening worship there, a place where resources could be available if someone was facing a tough time, a place like Cheers where everybody knows your name and people are glad to see you? I never acted on the vision because I didn't think we could do it alone, and it just didn't seem possible.

Well, last week I went to a meeting at the district office. The superintendent had called all the elders together and in the midst of the meeting he pitched a vision of planting one new church on our district in the next year. He envisioned a new kind of church, a coffee shop. He had even been looking at properties in Auburn because of its central Tri-City location. It could be a place where high school students could come, a safe place. Christian music playing in the background, the best Wi-Fi, great coffee, a magnet meeting place, a coffee shop church.

Light bulbs went off in my own mind as I heard him cast the vision that began aligning with what I'd considered for years but never acted on. And then the vision began to develop further, what if this would become another way to address the fact that young people are dying of addictions at an alarming rate as we've been discovering? What if this could become a coffee shop church that became a place students could come if they are having a tough time or if they are struggling with the kind of addictions we've been talking about and get the help they need, a place based on the love of Christ for all who walk in the door.

I've been doing some research on other non-profit, church run coffee shops and discovered some have books and music for sale that reflect the values of the faith community as they provide resources for people seeking God. Guest musicians come and provide entertainment that expresses God's grace and mercy. Some have book and Bible studies for those who seek to "...be transformed by the **renewing** of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" as Paul exhorts the Romans (Romans 12:2).

What if this is our next vision, to start a new kind of church in the city of Auburn? What if this is God's way of calling us to leave our comfortable place in order to reveal to a broken and hurting world the presence and power of a loving Christ whose desire is that everyone have life and have it abundantly?

I'll confess to you that I've been losing sleep over this, friends. I've been losing sleep over it because it's taking me out of my comfort zone. I've been losing sleep because it's already stretching me and creating some anxiety as I've shared my thoughts with our d.s., and he's been asking me to begin doing some research and laying some groundwork and see where this vision might lead. I've been feeling some anxiety about this because if this takes shape we

will be asked to help fund it. It would be a mission for us.

I've been losing sleep, and yet, this is the nature of God-sized visions when it comes to transforming the world. God calls us beyond our comfort zones just as God called Mary out of hers in order to be part of the transformation of the world by giving birth to Jesus. Christ followers have always been called beyond individual comfort zones when it comes to offering the kind of life that Christ offers. Transformations require leaving comfort zones whether they are wombs or tombs or churches.

So I'd like you to pray about this with me and ask God to guide and direct us if this is, in fact, a new vision we are being called to embrace. Believe me I understand the anxieties such visions can raise, but anxiety is not a reason to refrain from moving forward. If every follower of Christ gave in to personal fears—either their own or others around them--there would be no church, there would be no justice seeking, no soup kitchens, no One Week One Street, no Drug Awareness Group, no missions teams. We'd all play it safe and stay home. But that is not the way God works. Rather, we serve a God who casts visions and who also knows that those visions raise our fears which is why we hear God repeatedly say to those who receive them: "Do not be afraid, Mary." "Do not be afraid, Kris." "Do not be afraid, Sam or Clayton or Bob or Larry or Janet." Do not be afraid. Will you pray with me?