"Be not afraid"

An essay for my mom and other worried parents

Melanie A. Howard

It's only 7:30 a.m., but my phone has already dinged with a text message. "Are you OK? I haven't heard from you yet today," my mom has texted. I chuckle and type back, "Yes, I'm fine. I'll e-mail soon."

I may be in my early thirties, but if I have not sent my standard morning e-mail in a timely fashion, I can expect to receive some version of this message ensuring my health and safety. I have begun to learn that my numerical age has no relation to my mother's ability to worry about me, her only child.

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Fearful parents in the Old Testament

Parents fill the pages of Bible from nearly the beginning (Adam and Eve in Genesis 4) to the end (the woman clothed with the sun in Revelation 12). Likewise, parents in both the Old and New Testament receive exhortations not to fear.

The Old Testament preserves two such commands to parents to abstain from fear. One instance is in 1 Samuel 4:19–22. Upon receiving the news of her husband's death and the defeat of Israel, Phineas's wife is shocked into a labor and delivery that costs her her life. However, just before she succumbs to death, her birth attendants attempt to cheer her by telling her not to be afraid because she has borne a son. Evidently, she is to find solace in taking a long-range view of time in which her own death will be put into proper perspective by the fact that she has brought a son into the world.

In this moment of reckoning with the possibility of her child's death, Hagar receives the angelic instruction not to be afraid. She is provided with the reassurance that God intends to make her child into a great nation, and this promise proves sufficient to sustain her.

The other exhortation to a parent in the Old Testament appears quite early in the Old Testament narrative, just a few chapters into Genesis where Hagar perceives a heavenly voice calling her not to be afraid even in the face of a dying child (Gen. 21:17). This episode is particularly heart wrenching. Hagar has been sent against her will to be raped by the man who owns her. She is forced to birth and to raise the son who was conceived by that act. Then, when the woman who owns her feels threatened, Hagar is sent with only the most meager provisions to fend for herself and her young child in the wilderness. When the provisions are depleted, Hagar abandons the child beneath the protection of a bush and turns aside so as not to witness the death of her own son. It is in this moment of reckoning with the possibility of her child's death that Hagar receives the angelic instruction not to be afraid. She is provided with the reassurance that God intends to make her child into a great nation (Gen. 21:18), and this promise proves sufficient to sustain her.

Fearful parents in the New Testament

The command to parents to avoid fear permeates the New Testament as well. Some variant of the phrase "do not be afraid" or "do not fear" appears roughly twenty-four times throughout the New Testament, and of these, five are directed specifically to parents or parents-to-be. Given the limited use of the phrase overall, the identification of this particular audience is striking.

The first appearance of the phrase "do not be afraid" occurs within the first chapter of the New Testament as Joseph is assured by an angel that he should not be frightened to take the steps that will lead to his parenting of Jesus (Matt. 1:20). Luke's account, though focused on Mary, includes a similar exhortation to a parent-to-be to avoid fear as Mary embarks upon her impending pregnancy (Luke 1:30). Luke sets up this pronouncement with a similar declaration made to Zechariah as he receives news of his own upcoming fatherhood (Luke 1:13). Finally, in both Mark's (5:36) and Luke's (8:50) account of the healing of Jairus's daughter, Jesus discourages Jairus from being fearful about his presumably dead daughter's well being.

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In short, one of the common messages to parents throughout the New Testament is not to be afraid. In most of these cases, the cause for possible parental fear is left unarticulated. Fear for health, social honor, or overall wellbeing could all be in the background. Indeed, the more generic statement "Do not be afraid," rather than a more specific injunction, "Do not worry about _____" could be intentional. Such a generic statement might be aimed at ensuring that all possible causes for parental fear are simultaneously acknowledged and subsumed under God's care.

A mother's fear and the Magnificat

Despite these many encouragements to parents in the Bible not to be afraid, I would like to focus not on these words themselves but on the response of one parent who received this message: Mary and her song of praise. The Gospel of Luke recounts the angelic revelation to Mary concerning her pregnancy and impending birth (1:26–38). Shortly following this pronouncement, Mary embarks on a journey to visit her relative, Elizabeth, and in the context of the meeting, Mary bursts forth into the prayer of praise known to us today as the Magnificat (1:46–55).

This prayer celebrates the social upheavals and radical reversals that are present in God's work. Mary proclaims, "[The Mighty One] has scat-

tered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (Luke 1:51b–53). These words celebrate the Reign of God in which those who were previously oppressed have new opportunities. The text is rich in hope for the poor and the marginalized.

However, we might ask why such a prayer appears here of all places. What is it about these early days of pregnancy that inspires such words in Mary? Has a hormone surge sparked previously unknown poetic abilities? Or is there, perhaps, a different motivation that underlies this sudden poetry?

The Magnificat in historical context

Luke does not explain what inspires Mary's spontaneous speech. Nonetheless, one might wonder whether it might not have something to do with her sudden realization about what it means to bring a child into the world, specifically *this* child and *this* world. Living under the thumb of the occupying Roman Empire, Mary would have likely been well aware of the realities for Jewish peasants living under these imperial forces.

After a brief period of Jewish rule under the Hasmoneans, the region of Galilee was swept back under Roman rule with the Roman General Pompey's conquest in 63 BCE. Just a few miles up the road from Nazareth, the large town of Sepphoris was requisitioned as a center for Roman power in the area. While Luke does not provide details of Mary's backstory, it is not unlikely that this Roman grab for power close to home would have been a story that Mary heard from parents or grandparents for whom this takeover was a part of their living memory.

With this background in mind, Gabriel's words to Mary may sound rather different. Gabriel predicts that Mary's son will receive David's throne and "will reign over the house of Jacob forever. . . . Of his kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1:32–33). How would this sound to Mary who, as a girl, may have heard stories from her family of the way that Jewish rulers in the city just up the road were deposed by Roman forces? Would she readily embrace this unexpected angelic promise, or would she be apprehensive about what such a political future might mean for her unborn son? Given the realities of human nature, I have to imagine that at least a bit of the latter possibility would have been present.

How, then, do we hear the words of the Magnificat? Could they be motivated by fear? Although Gabriel's speech to Mary was prefaced by the

exhortation, "Do not be afraid" (Luke 1:30), one could easily excuse Mary for being anxious about the social shame that she might incur as a result of her pregnancy or the future safety of her child within a dangerous sociopolitical milieu.[1] Perhaps it was this place of uneasiness that led to her erupting into this prayer. Perhaps her words here are as much a proclamation of God's great work as they are a personal reassurance that injustice and oppression cannot finally prevail.

The Magnificat: A faithful response to parental fear?

Given Mary's situation, one might expect her speech to focus on the many direct issues at hand related to her pregnancy. However, rather than focusing her attention on the immediate concerns, Mary directs her words to short, declarative statements of what she knows to be true of God's work of justice and God's character in commitment to the downtrodden. It is notable that every verb in the Magnificat for which God is the implied subject is in the aorist tense, the Greek verbal tense for simple past action.[2] Mary's theology, then, is not built out of lofty schemas or complex doctrines. Rather, it is a series of assertions: God did *this*. God did *that*. For whatever fears Mary might have from the microcosmic perspective of being a mother, she addresses these fears through a macrocosmic approach of naming God's actions against systemic injustices and oppression.

Mary's inclination in the Magnificat to direct her attention not to the immediate fears of her present situation but to God's larger work in the world is a perspective that is later echoed in her own son's teachings.

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1 Beyond this, it is also important to remember that by most dating estimates, Luke is penning this narrative after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE. As Richard W. Swanson observes, "Luke's story is told in the smoldering aftermath of the First Jewish Revolt against Rome, a revolt that failed miserably" ("Magnificat and Crucifixion: The Story of Mariam and her Son," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 34, no. 2 [April 2007]: 107). Thus, even as Luke recounts one character's possible method of dealing with fear, Luke himself may be similarly attempting to deal with fear or anxiety.

2 Additionally, John T. Carroll observes that these verbs generally appear "in emphatic first position in each clause" (*Luke: A Commentary*, New Testament Library [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012], 48). Thus, the syntax may also be suggesting an emphasis on these simple past actions from God. I. Howard Marshall, however, finds this use of the past tense to be a "problem" because of his suspicion that God's actions as described in the Old Testament are not in the immediate context here. Marshall, rather, suggests, "What God has now begun to do, and Mary regards prophetically as having already come to fruition, is described in terms of what God actually did in OT times, as expressed in Israel's praise in the OT" (*The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008], 84).

In Luke 12:22–31, Jesus likewise encourages a perspective that focuses on God's macrocosmic work. Jesus exhorts his audience to seek God's kingdom (12:31) because such a search not only will result in achieving a reality of peace and justice but will also take care of the logistical details of life such as what to eat or what to wear (12:22). Even as Jesus encourages a long-range view of reality, he likewise suggests that God's work is so enmeshed with the details of life that even birds and plants are not outside of God's purview (12:24, 28).

Comfort for anxious parents

The Magnificat, as Mary's response to potentially alarming news, may offer a helpful model for fearful parents today. Parental fears can be vast, ranging from concern for getting proper nutrition to surviving deadly diseases, from coming home on time to thriving in life with a disability, from getting a good grade on a test to avoiding unjust racially biased violence, and from going to bed on time to discovering meaning in life. Some fears may be irrational, others deeply rooted in dangerous realities. Perhaps the same was true of Mary's own apprehensions as she approached the task of mothering a child who faced a hazardous world.

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Nonetheless, Mary's response to whatever fears she may have had was rooted in her observations of God's inclination toward justice for the oppressed.[3] Would her son survive the power of the Roman Empire? She did not know, but she could declare that God "showed strength" (Luke 1:51). Would her child have any chance of inheriting the throne of David, as the angel promised her? She could not be certain, but she could proclaim that God "brought down the powerful from their thrones" (1:52). Would God help her in the ordeal to come? She could not see the future, but she could assert that God "helped his servant Israel" (1:54). Mary's simple, declarative theology sets whatever fears she had in the context of God's historical work for God's people.

3 One might be reminded of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s proclamation that "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

A look toward the long-range perspective of God's work of justice will probably not stop my mom from sending me a text message when I have not contacted her soon enough one morning. But here is my prayer for her and for the many parents who worry about children in so many ways: I pray that these moments of fear and anxiety may serve as a reminder that the work of God in the macrocosm of the universe is far greater than these concerns of the microcosm, even as God's great, macrocosmic work contains this microcosm as well. Parental worries need not be trivialized, but they can be contextualized in light of a great God who parents the whole world. My hope is that in every moment when my parent, or any parent, finds herself worrying about a child, she will take that worry as a reminder of God's great provisions, even in the darkest of times. For every daughter who has stayed up past her bedtime to every son who is struggling with a disability, I pray that there would be a parent encountering those moments as reminders of God's care for the lowly, the humble, and the oppressed.

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About the author

Melanie A. Howard is assistant professor and program director of Biblical and Theological Studies at Fresno Pacific University. Melanie completed her PhD at Princeton Theological Seminary (2015) with a dissertation on mothers in the Gospel of Mark. Melanie and her husband, Jeremiah, are active members of Willow Avenue Mennonite Church in Fresno, California.