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Traders Point, how are we doing? It's so good to be with you. My name is Ryan, and I'm one of the pastors around here. To everyone at all the campuses and everyone watching online, welcome.

It is December 1, which means all things Christmas are now officially acceptable. Who here already has their tree put up in their house? I love it. Me too. Let' go a step further. Who here has already put lights up on the outside of their house? You all are wild—scaling buildings, risking your life for this. You guys are too much.

My house never gets the light package. I want to take a moment and thank you, because when my kids want to see a light, we take a drive. We go and we look at all of your hard work. So, from my family to yours, "Thank you so much."

And if this is your first time with us, you picked a great time to start coming. We're actually kicking off a brand new series of messages today called *The Way Back*. And when we talk about a series, what we do is take a book of the Bible, a big concept, or an event—something that is going to take us a long time to work through.

And instead of just getting up here and preaching for like four hours on a Sunday, we say, "Let's break this thing up." I know. We get the emails every week of how you guys want longer and longer sermons, and we hear you. But we're going to stick with this plan for now, and we'll see how it plays out.

But for this series, which is going to take us from now all the way up to our Christmas services, what we are going to look at is that first Christmas. And this big idea is that God sent Jesus here to provide a way back, back to him, back to restore so many things that have gone wrong in our lives.

But what we see when we look under the hood of that first Christmas is that it is really different than what you are thinking. That first Christmas was filled with fear, it was anxiety-filled, it was chaotic. There was so much going on.

And maybe you are sitting here today going, "You're talking about Christmas, right?" The birth of the 8 pound 3 ounce Jesus. You're talking about chaos? You mean the nativity scene at my grandma's house? The one where everyone is in that Joanna Gaines style farmhouse, and the horse is making a bed for Jesus out of hay, and the dog is bringing the bottle over to feed Jesus? And there you have Mary, Joseph, and sweet baby Jesus just sitting under the stars. And if you look long enough, you see a shooting star scurry across the sky. That Christmas?

That Christmas didn't happen. It's not a real thing. That Disney-esque picture we like to set, that's not what the first Christmas looked like. We see that first Christmas was actually filled with fear. There was a teenage pregnancy—fear. There was a wedding that was almost called off at the last minute. That was fear. There is so much going on that no one really has answers

to, and no one seems prepared for. There was so much fear in Mary, Joseph, and all of the people around them.

Is there anyone here today who can relate to that? Like that kind of fear? You're here today on the first day of December, but really the only thing you feel right now is fear. It feels like everything else has kind of fallen off the rails. And even though you know Christmas is in the background and is coming really quick, it doesn't really feel like something we're celebrating.

You know, there is this line from *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* where they walk out into Narnia for the first time. And they say, "Here it is always winter, but it's never Christmas." Does anyone feel like that today? Like no need to audibly agree or raise a hand, but if you are here and you're working through a lot of fears, we want you to know this one is for you. And Jesus offers a way back, maybe back for the first time for you.

We're so glad you're here. We want to invite you back again. You don't want to miss next week. Aaron is going to be back and he will walk through what it looks like to walk out of anxiety. So, make sure you don't miss that one.

But for today, we're really going to be drilling into fear. And to do this, we're going to take a step back and go way before Bethlehem, way before the nativity scene, way before that night. We're actually going to go back to the very, very beginning before the manger, before the birth.

To do this, we're going to be in Luke 1 starting in verse 26. The guy who wrote this, Luke, was actually hired. He was contracted out to a very, very rich man. Think about if Zuckerberg wanted to know something, he would hire someone and go, "Tell me all the things about this."

So, this guy looks for the smartest person he knows, and he finds Luke. He says: Go back and research. Go back and talk to the eye witnesses from the account of Jesus' birth and life and bring back everything to me, so I can know.

Luke tells us why he did this, why he wrote this whole account of Jesus' life. He says it's so we can be certain of the truth we find in the Bible. So, that's what we're going to be looking at today, starting in Luke 1:26. No worries if you don't have a Bible, everything I read will be on the screens behind me. Take a look at this:

"...God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. Gabriel appeared to her and said, 'Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!'"

Alright, so some big things to hold on to here before we move forward. There is a lot going on here. An angel appears. This is a really big deal because nothing has happened, no one has heard from God in a long time. About 400 years, which is completely out of the normal. Because the Jewish people had this long-standing relationship with God where God was always there.

God sent prophets, God spoke to his people, God rescued his people. He was there all the time. And then you have these 400 years of silence, when everyone begins to question and everyone begins to have these fears. Is God ever going to speak again? Is God going to show up again? It's been winter without Christmas for a really long time.

And then we see this. God shows up. He sends an angel. But he doesn't send an angel to whom you might think. He doesn't send an angel to a king, some religious leader, some priest. No, he sends this angel to a virgin named Mary, this ordinary, regular person just like you and me. But that doesn't exactly comfort Mary. Take a look at this:

"Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean. 'Don't be afraid, Mary,' the angel told her, 'for you have found favor with God! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!'"

Whew. As you can imagine, when an angel from the Lord appears to you and says, "Greetings, favored woman," it doesn't exactly take away fear. What do you do with this? She is trying to process what being favored even means. The angel picks up on all of that. You notice he said this.

"Don't be afraid, Mary," the angel told her, "for you have found favor with God!"

Now, if you've ever been afraid, having someone say, "Hey, don't be afraid", is possibly the worst thing you could hear in that moment. Never in the history of fear has anyone stopped being afraid because someone thought, "Oh, I just need to tell them not to be afraid."

I remember for me, when I was younger I'd be riding around in the truck with my grandpa and we would be in Kentucky, way out in the middle of nowhere. Way out so far that you turn off the main road to the side road, to the grave road and then you get to these spots where you can't get through unless you get out of the truck, open the gate all the way, drive through, and then close the gate behind you.

Does anyone know some places like this? Those are the worst places. I'm about to get out of the truck and my grandpa leans over and says, "When you get out of there, watch out for snakes." I said, "What?" He says, "Yeah, watch out for snakes when you go to undo the gate." I said, "Are there snakes here?" He said, "Yeah son, we're in Kentucky. There are snakes here." I said, "I'm pretty afraid." He said, "You don't have to be afraid."

"I'm pretty afraid."

"Oh no, no, you don't have to be afraid." And then he said, "If you need it, there is a shovel in the back."

I said, "Why do I need a shovel? Am I digging my own grave out here?"

He's like, "No, no, no but if a snake comes, you can just hit it with a shovel."

I said, "Sir, there is no world in which a snake comes and my first thought it to hit it with a shovel. I'm afraid!"

He said, "Don't be afraid."

But that's not what the angel does here. The angel tells Mary exactly why she doesn't have to be afraid: You don't have to be afraid because you've found favor with God. Hold onto that,

because that is going to be a really big thing that comes back. He says: You don't have to be afraid because you've found favor.

You can tell that Mary is trying to process all of this. She is trying to catch her breath, remember what is going on. So, she starts playing back what the angel just said to her. Greetings, favored woman." Who talks like that. That's probably what she is thinking, and then she's probably dismantling her whole view of what she thought an angel would look like: I thought he would be bigger, but here we are. So, you're an angel. I'm favored. What did he say next?

"You will give birth, conceive a child, and you will name him Jesus." Huh, if I had a son I don't know if I would name him Jesus. Maybe Reese or something like that. But it's cool, I guess. But wait a minute. Conceive and give birth? The fears come back. The questions come back. She finds her voice and she kind of has something to bring up that is pretty valid. Look what Mary asked the angel.

"Mary asked the angel, 'But how can this happen? I am a virgin.'" That is a fair question in this situation. "The angel replied, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God.'"

Oh, well that settles it. But there is a lot going on here, and so much will be coming at her. I want to see how she closes out this conversation in verse 38, look at this. It is beautiful.

"Mary responded, 'I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true.' And then the angel left her."

What a night. Can you imagine being there? Mary, she has her whole life kind of set up in front of her. It's all about to go down. She has a fiancé. She is about to get married. And then in this one moment, with this one interaction with an angel, everything changed. Every plan, every idea, every dream she had about her future was not completely wiped away. That will induce some fear.

What do you do with this information? How do you tell people this, that you are about to have God's baby? How do you tell your parents that? How do you tell your finance that? She has all these fears.

We see pretty quickly that her fears are warranted. Right after this interaction with the angel, she goes and has a conversation with Joseph. And I can only imagine how it went. They sit down to a nice cup of coffee. They start talking.

"How is it going?"

"Good, you?"

"Good. Anything new?"

"Now that you mention it, ummm, so yesterday there was this thing. I'm going to tell you something, and you're going to hear some things. Trust me. It's not what you think. I'm pregnant. Now stop. Don't look at me like that. It's not what you think. It's God's baby.

"I know, I know how it sounds. But I'm telling you, there was this angel. He is Gabrielle and he looked different than I thought he would. He was talking about me being favored. It was a whole thing, but just know we're still going to get married. I'm still going to marry you, don't worry about that."

Joseph is a little worried about that. We actually get Joseph's response once Mary shares with him that she is about to have a baby. It's a pretty short response:

"Joseph, to whom she was engaged, was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly."

He's not buying it. He is a good man. Instead of disgracing her publicly, which could have led to her being punished or even killed, he decides to break it quietly.

This is wild. This isn't a normal thing. I know sometimes we read the Bible and just think, "Huh, I guess that's what they were doing back then. God was just talking to people and handing out babies like hotcakes." It's not a normal thing. Even back then this is something that would have been so hard to believe that Joe can't. So, he breaks off the engagement. It would take an act of God for Joseph to believe what Mary is saying here. And that's exactly what he gets. Take a look at this:

"As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. 'Joseph, son of David,' the angel said, 'do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.'

"All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord's message through his prophet: 'Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means 'God is with us.'"

"When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife. But he did not have sexual relations with her until her son was born. And Joseph named him Jesus."

Sounds like Christmas, right? An angel comes to Joseph and did you notice the first thing he said to Joseph was, "Don't be afraid." He doesn't leave it at that, he tells him why he doesn't have to be afraid. He said: What is happening here, this isn't the first anyone is hearing about it. A virgin giving birth to a child, this was actually a prophecy that was given way before Mary and Joseph's lifetime to a prophet named Isaiah.

And the angel comes to Joseph and says that everything that Mary said is true. What is even wilder is you get to be a part of this. You get to see this promise come true, this promise God made a long, long time ago. You get to be there, and you will call him Immanuel which means "God is with us."

And after this dream Joseph goes back to Mary. Once again, I can only imagine the conversation.

“Hey Mary, you know? I’ve been thinking. If you say this is God’s baby, that’s all I need. I believe you. You are a good, honest woman inside and out. You say this, I believe it.”

And Mary is not buying it. “Oh, you believe me now, huh? Help me understand, Joe, because yesterday I was crazy. Yesterday I didn’t know what I was talking about. Yesterday I was off my rocker, but today you understand. Help me understand, Joe, what happened between yesterday and today? Can you break it down for me?”

“Well, ahh, things happened.”

“Oh, things happened? I don’t know, Joe. Did an angel come and tell you everything I said? Is that what happened, Joe?”

“More or less. More or less, that’s what happened.”

“Well, Joe, I can tell you one thing. If every time I say something, you need an angel to come down from heaven to fact-check what I’m saying, I don’t know if this marriage is going to be working out for the both of us.”

And Joe apologized, the first of many apologies in his marriage career.

And the fears begin to set in. It’s not hard to read this story and to feel the fear of what is going on. And maybe you’re here today and you can feel the fear in your own life, that you came in here with. Fears of how do I go into the holiday with this?

It’s not like Christmas creates its own fears, but it can feel like there is almost like a spotlight on all the things that have been going on all year and now is the time they’re going to be highlighted. Now is the time everyone is going to be able to see it, and you’re more aware of them.

So, maybe you have your own fears today. Fears of like, “How can I go home when I don’t have a job?” “How can I go home when I’m still single?” “How can I go home when my grades are going to come in? What are my parents going to think? Will they think I’m a failure?” “How can I go home when I’m still addicted?” “How can I go home after the arrest? Will everyone see me as a failure?”

We have all these fears. It’s not like there is anything new in the world of fear. A lot of the fears we struggle with today are the same fears that would have faced Mary and Joseph 2,000 years ago. These big buckets of fear we just kind of collect over time. The longer we go, the harder it gets to walk in this fear to the point where, “I don’t know if I can go any further. I need a way out.”

There are some big fears. Maybe you're here today and you just have this fear of failure. Mary and Joseph would have had this, how could they not? They are just starting out. They have no money. They have nothing. The failure rate would have been unbelievably high for them.

How is this going to work out? I have that fear all the time, the fear of failure. What it looks like is it stops you from being able to do anything, because you're so worried about messing it up. You don't even know where to go or what to look to, because life stops being about what's best or even what you should do, it just becomes this game of safety. This risk-management. "I better not mess this thing up."

It really is a fear of failure. And not of failure itself, because most of us never get to the point of actually failing. But in our minds it's better to not know than to fail and be certain we are a failure. Do you know what spending your life worried about failing produces? Fear.

Maybe some of you guys are here today, and you are focused on rejection. You have this fear of being rejected. Mary and Joseph would have had that. How could they not? They were about to have a baby outside of marriage, that will get you rejected pretty quick. What are their friends going to say? What are their families going to say? How is this whole thing going to shake out, and in what world are they not rejected?

Anyone here today with that one? You just constantly fear being rejected. It's this idea that you're only accepted because of what you produce. The moment you do the wrong thing or say the wrong thing, it's just a matter of time before you're rejected. It's just a matter of time before you lose your seat at the table. Fear of rejection is this fear of failure.

Then there is this all-encompassing fear that I won't be enough. This fear that I am not enough. Mary and Joseph had to be wrestling with that. How could they possibly think they were enough? Mary is not ready for a normal, ordinary baby, let alone God's baby. And Joseph, who is he to step in and be a step-dad for God's Son. How is this going to work. There would have been so much fear of not being enough.

Is anyone here today just haunted by that feeling? It just never feels like it goes away. It doesn't matter how hard you work, how much you hustle. It doesn't matter if you break your back for it, there is this thought in the back of your head that you will never be enough. You'll never be the father, you'll never be the mother, you'll never be the husband, you'll never be the wife, you'll never be the friend, you'll never be the employee, you'll never be the student. You will never be the person the people in your life need you to be.

There is this fear. It's like stepping underneath a squat-rack before you go down knowing there is no way you are going to be able to get this thing back up. This example is completely made up. I have no idea what it would feel like to be underneath a squat-rack. But I can only imagine how fearful it would be to feel all that weight, to know it's on your shoulders, and to know there is no way you're coming back up with this thing. That you're not enough. What is it for you?

What are you afraid of? Is it failing, being rejected, not being enough? What is it right now that you've had to put on the back-burner, that you've had to try to stop thinking about for this sermon and for this season, just so you can get through? The fear you have, the fear that is beginning to shape everything you do and why you do it. The fear you are afraid to mention. Do you have it?

Because here is what God came to say on that first Christmas. It doesn't matter how big that fear is. It doesn't matter how long you've been holding onto that fear. It doesn't even matter how many people in your life have validated that fear and told you that you should be afraid.

There is nothing that can compare. There is nothing that can compete. There is no fear of failure, no fear of rejection, no fear of not being enough that can stand against what God came to tell us on that first Christmas.

The reason the angel can stand there with confidence and tell Mary: You don't have to be afraid, he tells here why, and it's used to describe a relationship with God. It's the same word that describes all of our relationships with God, which is why it applies to all of our fears every single day.

He says: Mary, you don't have to be afraid because you have found favor with God. You have found favor with God.

Favor with God is the way back from fear.

Favor with God is the way back from fear. All of the fears, every single one of them. And maybe you're here today and you're thinking, "What does that mean? Favor." It's been a long time since I've said, "Greetings, favored one, how are you doing today?"

But favored is a pretty simple word. It just means to be a recipient of God's grace. When you have God's favor it means you are a recipient of God's grace. God is for you, and that changes everything.

A lot of times we get caught up in this thing about favor being just for the end of our lives. Like favor is what we get at the end of our lives when we pass away and walk up to heaven's gates and swipe our ID card. It changes the light from red to green, and we walk into heaven. That's favor, that's grace.

That is completely true. There is no world in which we get to be with God for eternity without grace, without favor. That is for God's heavenly gates. But favor is for so much more than that. You see, the favor we have, the favor God has placed on our lives, is not just for heaven one day. It is for today.

God's favor on our lives is not just for when we die, and what gets us into heaven. God's favor is for our relationships today. God's favor on our lives is for our jobs. God's favor on our lives is for our friends, for our kids, for every relationship we have. And this is a strong kind of favor. This is not weak. This is not anything built on fear. This is built on the power of God and the Spirit of God.



This isn't just favor for heaven's gates. This is favor for hell's gates. There is a reason hell has gates on it, because they are afraid of what we have because of the favor God has shown us. Everything trembles underneath the favor of God, because we have it. This isn't risk management. This isn't deathbed faith. This is I'll-bet-the-farm-on-it. This is I'll-give-my-life-to-it. This is I'll-go-anywhere-and-do-anything, because the only one I fear is God, and if he is for me, who can stand against me?

Anyone else here today with this kind of favor? Anyone else believe this on their lives? This favor that we have is for right now in this season. This favor dismantles every single fear.

And let me show you what I mean by this. God's favor on your past means you're forgiven. Everyone in the room today, everyone at every campus and watching online, God's favor, because he said we are favored, it means everything has been forgiven.

God's favor on your past = Forgiveness

So much of our lives are rooted in fear because of what once happened, what we went through, who we used to be, what was done to us. And we get this idea in our head that we will never be accepted, that we will never be forgiven, that we will always be a failure. God's favor says you have found forgiveness.

There is nothing that can take that away. There is no sin, there is no mess up. You can't fall far enough away from God's favor. It is still right there. And when we have that, when we have this favor, it doesn't stop there. Favor is not just for our past, and it's not just for heaven one day.

God's favor on your future = Freedom

Freedom. Because you can only imagine how your life changes when you know God is with you. When you know you are backed by the God of this universe, you have freedom. Your life is no longer kind of brought down and minimized to this idea of, "What if I fail?" You can't fail.

Your ideas of being accepted are gone, because you're not worried and living by what other people might think. No, you have favor, so you have freedom to live the life.

There is no question of, "Am I enough?" because you know that Son of God was willing to die for you. If that doesn't tell you that you're enough, nothing else ever will.

Oh, come on. God's favor on our lives is so extremely powerful that it gets us to this spot where Joseph is. Even though one day he is ready to walk away from all of it. He is ready to just be done with the marriage. He can't believe God would really do this, God would choose them, he has this one interaction with an angel, and the angel says, "Don't be afraid to..."

Everything that was going on in Joseph's life was fear. What will people think? How will they accept me? How can I stand next to her through all of this? There was so much fear, and the angel told him, "Do not be afraid to..." Do not be afraid to take her as your wife. Do not be afraid to stand next to her when that baby-bump begins to show. Do not be afraid to walk with her in faith when people begin to gossip. When they begin to say things that aren't true about you, when they begin to drag your name through the mud, when they don't understand the life that God has called you to, don't be afraid to, Joseph.

Do not be afraid to...

And our hope is that in this season we could all come to this place where we know that we have favor, we have forgiveness, we have freedom so we can get to this spot where we're not afraid to... We're not afraid to fail. We're not afraid to go first. We're not afraid of what other people might say. We're not afraid of being enough, because we know who we are.

When fear reminds you of who you aren't, let God's favor remind you of who you are.

And you will be blown away by the power that comes from that. Because you get to this spot where you realize you can't fail because Jesus already succeeded. You get to this spot where you know you can't be rejected, because Jesus was already accepted. You get to this spot where you know you are enough, because you have God's favor on your life.

And God's favor came with a Spirit. And it wasn't a Spirit of fear. It's a Spirit of strength, of power, of love, and it's a Spirit that can turn this world upside down. It's a Spirit that can't be stopped. It's a Spirit that walks through anything. It doesn't matter the valley, it doesn't matter what is going on. It has confidence because it knows who is with it.

We are with God. And as we go from here, as we begin to sit on this, and as you wake up tomorrow and those fears creep in (and they will not give up) we cannot be stopped. But the enemy will continue to try to distract us and make us believe we are not enough. He will make us believe we will fail, we've already been rejected, making us believe that we will never be enough.

That's where fears come from. Fears come from the false realities that I tell myself. Fears come from my voice. Fears come from what other people have said about me, what I have believed. Favor comes from God. Truth comes from God. And we can walk into this season completely brand new.

Let's not let this be another year where it's just winter, but not Christmas, because we have so much to celebrate because God has extended his favor on us. And our prayer as a church is if there is anyone here today... Maybe you didn't know that Jesus came on this incredible day. You didn't know he came and was born in Bethlehem. That he lived this perfect life. And at the end of it he went to cross and died for everyone, not just a select few, but for everyone.

That means everyone is a recipient of God's grace. That means God's grace is here for anyone and everyone. And if you're here today, our hope is that you respond to that. That you could walk out of fear and into favor.

Our hope is that we could get to this same spot Mary did. That even though fears were crashing all around her, she had so much going on, by the end of the conversation she said this: "May everything you have said about me come true."

And when that's the voice that is in our head, when that is the belief we have, when we know God is with us, that changes everything. That's what I want to pray over us right now. I just want to pray that everything God has said about us will come true. And then we're just going to have a few moments to think and reflect, and to talk with God about everything we've heard. Would you pray with me?

God, we thank you for today. God, we thank you for your word. God, we thank you for the accounts we have so that we can be certain. God, we can know you. Because of Jesus we can see you. Because of your grace we can understand just a little bit of you.

God, we pray today, we pray that because of the favor you have shown us, everyone here can walk out of fear maybe for the first time or for the first time in a long time.

God, we pray right now for your favor. We pray that it would be extended. God, we pray right now that we could literally feel the weight of our fears fall, the fear of failure fall, the fear of being rejected fall, the fear of not being enough fall.

And God, let us stand in newness. Let us stand in your grace. Let us stand in your Spirit. Let us stand in confidence, because we are more than enough in your Spirit. We are more than enough as your sons. We are more than enough as your daughters.

So, God, help us to take this favor and to leave here with it. Help us to live with it, not to hold it back or think it's only good for this one time, but it's good today. Your mercies are new every day. Your favor is new every day. God, help us to be there. Help us to experience that. God, may everything you've said about us be true. We love you. It's in Jesus' name: Amen.