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Advent / Peace / Luke 1:26–33

Peace and acceptance

September 10, 2024 Bible in a year

The year was 1182. A man was born and spent his youth being wild, running around Assisi in Northern Italy. In his day the Crusades were in full force. Once of age, he joined up. He became a soldier, going off to kill people in battle. He ended up in prison, became sick, and went home to recover. It was at this time that he became a Christian. One day, while praying at a church, he heard the voice of God say, “Go rebuild my church which is falling down.” He thought initially that God wanted him to physically rebuild the collapsing church building, so he starting doing repairs. But over time, he realized God wanted him to rebuild the entire Church around the world through prayer, poverty, and peace. He began to preach through the narrow streets of Assisi, saying “Pace e Bene!” meaning, “Peace and goodness to you.” He was laughed at and dismissed as a crazy fool. There was violence everywhere. He preached nonviolence and in response, people threw rocks at him. He was ridiculed, and he, in turn, blessed them, loved them, prayed for them, and eventually reconciled them

with one another. Others did eventually join him and the order of "Friars Minor" was formed.

He joined the Crusades again after his conversion, but this time a different crusade, the campaign of Gospel nonviolence. He gave away his possessions, lived in caves, kissed a leper, served the poor, and built a community of peacemaking friends. He once said "If you own possessions, you need weapons to protect them, and so we do not own anything and we are at peace with everyone. We have just begun to live the Gospel."

In 1219, he embarked on a year-long pilgrimage of nonviolence -- from Italy to Northern Africa -- right into the war zone. And there, at great peril, he secured a meeting with the sultan, Melek-el-Kamel, the leading Muslim of his time. He met, too, with the sultan's counterpart, the Christian general Cardinal Pelagius. Put a stop to the killing, he urged them both. The cardinal dismissed him, a friar, out of hand. The cardinal said the campaign was being conducted in Jesus' name, and under his sign and blessing. Interfere with that and one interferes with heaven's very purpose. For the purpose of heaven and the state are one, so we're told. This man would have none of it. The sultan received the man and his words with an altogether different attitude. The sultan was impressed by him -- such exemplary kindness and gentleness. "If all Christians are like this," said the sultan, "I would not

hesitate to become one."

Things weren't just difficult on this pilgrimage, but also in his own backyard. His friars began to murmur and grumble. They didn't like his politics or his outreach to the Muslims. They scoffed at his rules: own nothing, beg for food, serve the poor, preach the good news of peace. And now, Love your enemies, they couldn't handle it. Tensions mounted. His nonviolence and his voluntary poverty proved too much. The friars wanted houses. So they turned on him. They rejected him and his orders. He eventually resigned the administration of the order. He trudged off to the mountain of La Verna, where he spent his last years in solitude, prayer, penance, sickness, hunger and sorrow.

I want to speak about the passage that was just read from Luke 1:26-38, but then continue into verses 46-55.

If you were listening to this passage and thinking, man this sounds similar to last week's story about Zechariah, you would be correct. Ancient narrators like to parallel various characters. Luke here compares the respected priest Zechariah in Jerusalem's temple and the lowly girl Mary in a Galilean village with a comparison similar to that between the high priest Eli and the lowly Hannan in 1 Samuel (and hang onto Hannah's story, that we talked about a few weeks ago, we're going to come back to that briefly). Ancient writers not only contrasted good and bad role models but also good (in this case Zechariah) and

better (Mary).

So, both Zechariah and Mary are visited by an angel and are startled. And again, like last week, who wouldn't be! Fear was a common response to an angelic revelation. The angel responds the same way to both, "Do not be afraid." And again, last week we looked at the fact that fear wasn't the issue for Zechariah, remember, hope and fear are two sides of the same coin. Hope and fear converge to form an intersection, a crossing that is in fact the perfect birthplace for God with us. The fear wasn't the issue, it was his doubt. Continuing with the comparison between Zechariah and Mary, they are both told what to name their child, that their child will be great, and they themselves will be filled with the Holy Spirit. They both ask, How? yet here is the key difference. Just like fear, asking God How? wasn't the issue it was what came next. Zechariah doubted God, He asks How can I be sure of this? Adding, I am an old man and my wife is well along in years. Mary, doesn't, she just asks How will this be since I am a virgin? Her question builds on faith, not unbelief. Zechariah is told by the angel, Luke 1:20 "But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur,"" while Mary is told, Luke 1:45 "And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."" What must Mary have thought about the Lord's

plan? When Mary responds in faith, she faces the potential of public shame. She faces the prospect of a divorce or a broken betrothal and never marrying. She would likely wear the scarlet letter of her day and be forced from home and family. She would be destitute. She could be killed. Though she faced all this, she spoke in faith, she says the words which have rung down the years as a model of the human response to God's unexpected vocation: 'Here I am, the Lord's servant-girl; let it be as you have said.' And she does so with peace that surpasses all understanding. Mary is an example of what always happens when God is at work by grace through human beings. God's power from outside, and the indwelling spirit within, together result in things being done which would have been unthinkable any other way.

Mary then goes and visits Elizabeth.

Here's a question to you:

What would make you celebrate wildly, without inhibition?

Perhaps news that someone close to you who'd been very sick was getting better and would soon be home.

For others the news that their country had escaped from tyranny and oppression, and could look forward to a new time of freedom and prosperity.

Or seeing that the floods which had threatened their home

were going down again.

A telephone call to say that you had been appointed to the job you'd always longed for.

Whatever it might be, you'd probably do things you normally wouldn't.

You might dance, shout for joy, call everybody to invite them to a party.

You might sing a song.

And if you lived in any kind of culture where rhythm and beat mattered, it would be the sort of song you could clap your hands to, or stamp on the ground.

I'm going to read Mary's song, and I want you to think about it in those terms. Luke 1:46-55.

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered 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. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

This passage is known as the Magnificat, sometimes, as the gospel before the gospel, a shout of triumph thirty weeks before Bethlehem, thirty years before Calvary and Easter. It’s all about God, and it’s all about revolution. All because of Jesus—Jesus who’s just been conceived, not yet born, but who has made Elisabeth’s baby leap for joy in her womb and has made Mary giddy with excitement and hope and triumph.

As Tom Wright wrote,

“Why did Mary launch into a song like this? What has the news of her son got to do with God’s strong power overthrowing the power structures of the world, demolishing the mighty and exalting the humble?”

Mary and Elisabeth shared a dream. It was the ancient dream of Israel: the dream that one day all that the prophets had said would come true. One day Israel’s God would do what he had said to Israel’s earliest ancestors: all nations would be blessed through Abraham’s family. But for that to happen, the powers that kept the world in slavery had to be toppled. God would have to win a victory

over the bullies, the power-brokers, the forces of evil which people like Mary and Elisabeth knew all too well, living as they did in the dark days of Herod the Great, whose casual brutality was backed up with the threat of Rome. Mary and Elisabeth, like so many Jews of their time, searched the scriptures, soaked themselves in the psalms and prophetic writings which spoke of mercy, hope, fulfilment, reversal, revolution, victory over evil, and of God coming to the rescue at last.

All of that is poured into this song. Much of it echoes the song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2, the song which celebrated the birth of Samuel and all that God was going to do through him.

Parts of Hannah's song read:

“My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in my victory. “There is no Holy One like the Lord, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God. ...He will guard the feet of his faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness; for not by might does one prevail. The Lord! His adversaries shall be shattered; the Most High will thunder in heaven. The Lord will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to his king, and exalt the power of his anointed.”

Now Elizabeth and Mary celebrate together what God is

going to do through their sons.

The man I introduced at the beginning is often known as the Patron Saint of Peace, St Francis of Assisi, due to his profound reverence for all of God's creation and his efforts to reconcile divisions within society. It was in this spiritual darkness that he plumbed the depths -- or, the heights -- of contemplative nonviolence. He experienced the fullness of nonviolent, suffering love for Christ and all humanity. He prayed, "My Lord Jesus Christ, grant me two graces before I die. The first is that during my life I may feel in my body as much as possible the pain which you, dear Jesus, sustained in the hour of your most bitter passion. The second is that I may feel in my heart, as much as possible, the excessive love with which you, Son of God, were inflamed to willingly endure such suffering for us sinners."

St. Francis, lived in a time of great turmoil and strife. Yet, despite the violence and divisions around him, he became a living testament to the peace that transcends all understanding. The famous prayer, called the Prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi, even though he didn't write it, but also forms the lyrics to the hymn, Make me a Channel of your Peace goes like this:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;

where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.
O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Last week I told you the true story behind O Little Town of Bethlehem. Today, we're going to look at a different Christmas carol. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow is known as one of the most skillful people of literature that ever lived. He had an ability to portray life in one of the most beautiful fashions every devised - poetry. But tragedy struck his household when in 1861 his wife, Fanny, was near an open window sealing locks of her daughter's hair in a packet, using hot sealing wax, that suddenly her dress caught fire and Fanny was engulfed in flames. Longfellow was sleeping in the next room, awakened by the screams and dashed in, severely burning his face and hands as he tried to extinguish the flames, but unfortunately he was unable to save his wife. He was so burned he couldn't attend her funeral. He observed long periods of silence and a white

beard as a result of the tragedy, since he struggled to shave with the burns on his face. He needed the peace that only God can give to his children. With the loss of his wife, only 2 and 1/2 years early, on Christmas Day in 1863, he tried desperately to reflect on the joys of the season. He wrote a poem which was later put to music by John Calkin. The result...I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day.

“I heard the bells on Christmas day, their old familiar carols play, and wild and sweet the words repeat, of peace on earth, good will to men.” He thought about the civil war which was in full swing in his country. The battle of Gettysburg had started around 6 months prior. Things looked bleak and he probably asked himself, “How can the last phrase of those stanzas be true in this war-torn country, where brother fights against brother, and father against son?” But he kept writing,

“And in despair I bowed my head, there is no peace on earth, I said, for hate is strong, and mocks the song, of peace of earth, good will to men.”

Then, as we all need to do, he turned his thoughts to the One, writing, “Then pealed the bells more loud and deep, God is not dead, nor doth he sleep, the wrong shall fail, the right prevail, with peace on earth, good will to men.”

Peace is not just the absence of conflict but the active presence of love, forgiveness, and reconciliation. The

Christian call is not to be passive in the face of evil, but to actively bring the light of Christ into the darkness. This requires humility, selflessness, and a willingness to lay down our own desires for the sake of others. True peace begins with the heart. It is only when we are reconciled with God, with others, and with ourselves, that we can experience true peace. Peace - in our circumstances, but in our faith in God's plan.

The Prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi, I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day, Hannah's song and Mary's song, all praise God for His greatness and faithfulness. They echo the theme of God's power to bring peace by turning the world's expectations upside down. Let these stories, poems, songs, echo in your life today. Sing your own song of peace - a song that acknowledges the brokenness of the world, but also proclaims the hope that peace is possible because God is at work. He has already come through Christ to bring peace, and He will come again to make all things new.