

Are We There Yet? (Peace)

Preached FCCW December 8, 2019

Luke 1:26-38 and Isaiah 2:1-5

This morning we lit the Advent candle of Peace. Which almost sounds like an oxymoron. Because for most people, Advent is a season characterized by everything that is contrary to peacefulness. Advent, or as most people call it, the Christmas Shopping Season—is a time of high anxiety and stress.

The story of the angel Gabriel's announcement to Mary that she would bear God's Son however, *is* a surprisingly peace-filled Advent moment. There is a palpable serenity around this young peasant girl's reaction to the highly unsettling appearance of an angelic visitor; and the composure with which she accepts the weighty invitation he brings her.

The Bible contains numerous similar stories of people receiving a divine call to fulfill a sacred mission. Some were delivered by an angel messenger and some came directly from God. And there was *nothing peaceful* about most of them.

Moses complained loudly that he wasn't a powerful enough speaker to convince Pharaoh to set the Hebrew slaves free. Jeremiah whined that he was too immature for people to take him seriously. Isaiah wailed about his unworthiness to be a prophet. Gideon attempted to dodge military service by demanding not one, but two miracles to confirm it was really God that was doing the asking. And the list goes on and on.

Until... a teenage girl named Mary gets asked to carry God's only child to term in her young, fragile body. Nothing ever asked of anyone else in the Bible comes close to the enormity and the gravity of this calling. Yet, the closest Mary ever comes to offering any resistance, is her asking the obvious question of how God was going to turn her—a virgin—into the mother of God's Son.

Gabriel explained that the Holy Spirit would make it happen. He reminded her that, after all nothing is impossible for God. If she demanded proof of that, she need look no further than one of her own relatives. Elizabeth, who had never been able to conceive a child while she was young, and who was now well past the age of bearing children, was now pregnant, just as God had promised her husband Zechariah she would be.

Mary thought about it and then made her decision: "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." The peace with which Mary willingly submitted to God's will for her has itself inspired much speculation about her decision.

The question of what Mary knew and when is the basis of the song, "Mary, Did You Know?"

Mary did you know that your baby boy would give sight to the blind and restore hearing to the deaf?

Did you know that he would walk on water or calm a storm?

How much did you comprehend Mary, about this child who would somehow be the Lord of all creation and your own flesh and blood at the same time?

And Mary, could you ever imagine the cruelty with which your child would be repaid for the kindness and healing he showed to others?

That the Son of God would be rejected and condemned by those who claimed to be the guardians of God's truth?

That he would be abandoned by his supporters and betrayed by his most intimate friends?

Mary, could you ever, in your darkest nightmares possibly conceive what it would cost you, as a mother, to helplessly witness your defenseless son's public ridicule and his barbaric execution?

And what about the dangers that this unprecedented pregnancy would place you in?

Had you considered *those* possibilities when coming to your decision?

Once it became public knowledge that you were with child, who was going to buy your story about the Holy Spirit being the cause of your condition?

Did you believe that an outlandish defense such as that could exonerate you from a public scandal which would lead to either the shame of a divorce by your betrothed husband-to-be or your being stoned to death as an adulteress?

When Gabriel first appeared to you Mary, he introduced himself by saying, "Greetings favored one." But it didn't seem like he was doing you any real favors when you consider all the potential risks that would surely follow your assent to the role you were asked to take on.

Gabriel told you not to be afraid. But surely even a teenaged girl like you could see that there were actually plenty of reasons to be justifiably terrified.

While we can only speculate about which things Mary might or might not have known, and how they led her to the decision she came to, there is one thing we can confidently assume she did know something about. And that one thing was the nature of the God she knew through the sacred scriptures of her people. The God who promised His chosen people that a day would dawn when injustice, poverty, violence and every sort of evil that had always beset humanity-- would be no more. And that one thing that Mary assuredly did know, made all the difference for her. And all the difference for all of us.

And so, Advent invites us to wait, in our own way, for the coming of the Christ child. But for us it is a different kind of waiting than it was for Mary, because Christ has already arrived, thanks

to the courageous choice made by the daughter of an obscure village, who the world would never have remembered if her decision had gone a different way than it did.

Our Advent is really about the return of Christ and for the full arrival of God's reign on earth, when swords shall be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. When nation shall not lift up sword against nation but will walk together in the ways of God's *shalom*. When God's ways of justice and peace will reign supreme for eternity and the ways of conflict and injustice will be forgotten forever.

Are we there yet? Not by a longshot.

So, we wait.

In some ways, our Advent waiting is not completely unlike Mary's waiting, or the waiting of any expectant mother. The timing of a baby's arrival and the coming of God's Kingdom are both beyond anyone's control. All that can be done is to wait. But there is much that we can do while we wait.

Just as any responsible expectant mother knows, waiting for childbirth is a time of lifestyle changes in anticipation of the new life to come. Every decision about what is put into a mother's body and everything to be abstained from; every physical activity to be pursued or avoided, are all shaped and determined by how beneficial or detrimental its effect will be on the life that is on its way. And we, as followers and disciples of Mary's child, should be living our lives according that which best nurtures in our present, the future that is surely coming.

God did not come to those who would be considered "favored" by the world's way of reckoning, based on what privileges or advantages they have been given. God came to ordinary people like Mary, who were favored because God's presence with them made them so. And, God still comes to ordinary people like Mary. And, ordinary people like us. Calling each of us to bear the life of Christ in us, with whatever costs and sacrifices may accompany our choices to live the way that God has chosen for us. Not fearful of what the world might take from us, but sustained by a peace that the world cannot give. The peace of knowing that with God nothing will be impossible.

May we respond to our own calling from God as Mary responded to hers: "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

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