

As We Wait, God Gives us Peace

Isaiah 11:1-10, Luke 1:46-55

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We are still waiting on this second Sunday of Advent - waiting to celebrate the birth of Jesus and waiting for the restoration of all things when Jesus comes to us again. The ancient Israelites had a word to describe the restoration of creation. It's the word shalom which is translated into English as the word peace, but it means more than the absence of conflict. The image of a damaged brick wall that has been put back together with every brick put back in place so that the wall is whole again is a good image to illustrate the meaning of shalom. It's what comes when our lives and the world are put back together as God intends.

The familiar prophecy from Isaiah that we read this morning gives us a beautiful vision of God's shalom. It is a vision of a world where predators and prey coexist peacefully; where vulnerable toddlers play in the vicinity of poisonous snakes; where pain and destruction are no longer part of the reality of life. It is a world filled with the knowledge of the Lord where Jesus reigns with righteousness and justice. It is a vision that stands in stark contrast to the reality of the world we currently know, and it can feel elusive and even like the stuff of wishful thinking. Nice to imagine, but even if it's really coming *someday*, does it make any difference *today* when my life is falling apart and the world *isn't* safe or peace filled?

There is no way around the waiting. The initiating and doing has always been God's part to do and the waiting and responding ours. Brian encouraged us last week with the reminder that in the waiting time there are opportunities for growth, and formation, and transformation- opportunities that God doesn't waste. Today, as we focus on the advent theme of peace, we can be encouraged with the good news that God doesn't withhold good gifts from us as we wait. Even as we wait for the day when Jesus will bring his peaceful kingdom in all its fullness, the gift of peace that we long desperately for is a reality that we can experience now – even in a world that is still broken and even in times when it feels like our own lives are falling apart. In the story of Mary, we see evidence of this truth.

Our Gospel text for this morning is a song that comes from the lips of Mary when meeting up with her cousin Elizabeth who was five months pregnant with John the Baptist. It is a scene drenched with the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. You can almost feel as you read what seems to be like an electric current bouncing around and between the two women. Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and speaks a word of blessing and confirmation over Mary. The baby in Elizabeth's womb leaps inside of her, and then Mary breaks out into song. The joy of the moment is palpable in the text, and the words to Mary's song are an expression of worship, and gratitude, and complete confidence in God. A song of praise is not necessarily an unexpected utterance from a faith-filled girl, and Mary was full of faith, but given her circumstances it would be understandable if she had expressed feelings of anxiety or fear.

These were the circumstances. She and the rest of Israel were living under the rule of the Romans and the cruel puppet king Herod. Suffering, violence, the exploitation of the poor and vulnerable – these were all woven into daily life in Mary's world. For generations Israel had been waiting for the fulfillment of the promises made through the ancient prophets, and then, one day the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and told her she was going to conceive and give birth to a baby who would be none other than the long-awaited Messiah that God had promised to send. This was good news and Mary received this message with faith and a willingness to be used by God, but it came with a lot of uncertainty and risk for Mary. If people didn't believe her, she would be exposed to judgment, punishment, and shame.

Despite the frightening possibilities that lay ahead of her; even though she was young and small and a virtually powerless figure in her own context, remarkably Mary didn't shrink in fear. Her brave song reveals that hers was a heart at peace, but that peace didn't come from being in control or because she was confident in her own abilities to deal with or overcome challenges. The peace in Mary's heart transcended her circumstances. It was what Paul describes as the peace that passes understanding and it came from her confidence in God.

The peace that Mary experienced is the same peace available to us – even now. When the world is still broken and conflicted; when the people and systems we rely on fail; when the next steps in our lives are unclear. If we don't feel peace in those times, it doesn't

mean that it isn't available, but it may mean be that we have left the gift "unopened" like Diana explained to Thomas in the Trouper's play.

If we aren't sure how to "open the gift," the words to Mary's song are instructive. Her song begins with the words, "my soul magnifies the Lord." It is worth pausing to think about that word magnify. To magnify something is to make it larger in your field of vision. Mary didn't magnify her fears, or her unanswered questions, or her lack of control. Instead, she made God the biggest reality in her heart and mind — bigger than Rome, bigger than Herod, bigger than shame, bigger than uncertainty. And when God became big, her fears became smaller. There's a saying: *Don't tell God how big your storm is. Tell your storm how big your God is.* Mary did exactly that. That's how she opened God's gift of peace.

It is so easy for all of us to magnify the things that cause us to feel anxious and afraid and small. We usually can do it without any help, but we get help anyway from 24-hour cable news, and social media feeds, and our own relentless thought loops that like to replay hurtful words and situations. When our hearts, and minds, and eyes stay fixed on what troubles us, those things become bigger and bigger in our field of vision, but there are ways that we can magnify God.

One way to magnify God is by doing what Mary did long before she was ever visited by the angel. Mary was steeped in the word of God. She knew the history of her people and their relationship with God. She knew the stories of how God had been faithful and kept God's promises in the past. She knew the words and promises of the

prophets so when the angel came and announced what God was about to do, she was able to perceive that God was in what was happening. We know that God's word was planted deeply in Mary's heart because when she sang her song, it wasn't just her own words that came bubbling up out of her. Almost every word of the song is a quotation from Scripture. One of the best ways that we can make God larger in our own field of vision is by reading and returning to the words of the Bible again and again. Through Scripture we get to know God. There we see God's attributes, God's power, and God's promises revealed, and when these truths are hidden in our hearts and remain at the front of our minds, they help us magnify the Lord and not our problems.

Magnifying God isn't just something we do for ourselves or for our own benefit though. If, like Mary, we are ready and prepared to perceive the acts of God and glimmers of God's kingdom that breakthrough in our world like shoots springing up out of seemingly dead stumps, we can magnify God by pointing out to others where and how we see God at work. This is what Mary was doing with her song, and it's also what she did as she obeyed God and agreed to do what God had given her to do. If we are willing, like Mary, to be obedient to God and to let God use us even if we feel small and even if it doesn't seem like our small faithful acts have big results, God can and will be magnified in and through our lives. Other people will be able to look at us and see signs that God is good, and present, and working to bring healing and salvation to our world.

Earlier in the service the choir sang the hymn from our advent devotional *My Soul Cries Out with a Joyful Shout*. It is a version of Mary's song, and it gives voice to the same confidence in God that she expresses in the Scripture. After the angel visited Mary, she still found herself waiting for the fulfillment of Isaiah's vision, but she believed it would happen because she could already see God at work in her own life. She already had peace even as she waited for God's peace that will someday cover the earth. As we continue to wait, God gives us the same assurance: peace is not only a future promise. It's a present gift. May God give us eyes to see, hearts to trust, and lives that magnify the Lord as we wait with hope. Amen.

