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December 22, 2024

Advent: Changed in the Waiting
PEACE

Luke 1:46-55

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West Valley Church
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12/22/24

Advent: Changed in the Waiting Peace

There are four Sundays of Advent. Advent is about waiting – replaying the waiting of the world for Christ's first arrival, and recognizing that we live in these in-between times between Christ's resurrection and his return. There are four themes that entered the world with Christ's first advent: hope, love, joy, and peace. Today is the Sunday of Advent of Peace.

Peace is an interesting and illusive concept. Peace has preoccupied philosophers for centuries, from Plato and Aristotle to Kant and Hegel and Schopenhauer and Gandhi. There are many dominant concepts of the philosophy of peace that have emerged – things like “pacifism,” which seeks to remove conflict through non-violent methods, “positive peace,” which seeks to resolve conflict through removing inequality, “peace process,” which states the removal of conflict is on ongoing process, and many, many other ideas. There is one thing that is common in all those philosophies of peace: they are all seeking the *absence* of conflict, whether its interpersonal or international. All these centuries of philosophy have only been able to define peace as what's left when you remove conflict. To them, peace is the absence of whatever upsets or stresses or causes anxiety or conflict.

Is that what Advent peace is about? Is that the peace that God prepared to bring into the world with the arrival of Christ? Would the baby born in the manger somehow drive out everything that causes us conflict?

When the angel appeared to Mary, she was a Jewish, young, unmarried virgin. She was living in an incredibly oppressed and violent time for Jewish people. They were living in the land promised to them in the Old Testament Exodus story. But they were less than civilians in their own land. They were living under Roman rule, and the Romans were ruthless when it came to running the government, especially toward non-citizens. The Romans allowed the Jews to exist because they accomplished a purpose for the government. The Jews did the menial work that kept the economy going. What little money they made was taxed significantly. Besides that, taxes were assessed by contracted tax collectors, who had no problem adding personal “service fees” to an individual's taxes – a chance to squeeze more money out of the Jews for their own gain. After all, who would dare argue with the IRS, right? Worse than being a non-citizen, the Jews were barely considered human. You want to talk about racism; the Jews were at the bottom of everyone's totem pole. Worse yet, Mary was a Jewish woman – in that culture and even among Jews, women were lower than dogs.

So Mary's existence, which is the furthest thing from peaceful, is disrupted even worse with the arrival of the angel. The angel told her that, in her current state, she would become pregnant and give birth to the Messiah, God's Son – the Savior of the world. Even though Christ was the prophesied prince of peace, that hardly seems to have created a peaceful situation for Mary. If anything, that announcement created all kinds of conflict. She could be outcast from her family and her community. She was engaged to be married – she'd likely have that broken off, and according to Jewish law, she should be stoned to death. Not exactly creating what philosophers would call a peaceful scenario.

And yet, Mary's response is one of the most beautiful and poetic pieces of literature – not just in the Bible but anywhere. Imagine, in the midst of all that disruption of her already difficult existence, she sings this song:

“My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name.
His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
to Abraham and his descendants forever,
just as he promised our ancestors.” (Luke 1:46-55, niv)

Notice what is missing in Mary's song: there's no mention of the turmoil that this announcement has created for her. There's no hostility on her part toward God for messing up her status quo and making a bad situation worse. There's no anger or resentment at God for creating all this social and interpersonal and biological chaos in her life. No; instead, her response is one of praise, of humility, of acknowledging God's greatness and his ultimate plan for the well-being of all people. She's incredibly grateful that she will play this part in the arrival of the prince of peace.

How is that possible? How is this young woman able to be so peaceful when everything in her world, her circumstances, and now her personal life is filled with conflict?

The answer to that is twofold: one has to do with the biblical definition of peace. The other has to do with Mary's chosen response to God.

Remember that according to history's brightest minds, peace is defined by what it is *not* – peace means no conflict. But God's peace is not defined as the absence of something; it is defined as the presence of *Someone*. Let me repeat that: God's peace is not defined as the absence of something; it is defined as the presence of *Someone*. While we spend all our time trying to drive out or remove conflict, God gives us peace *in the middle of* our conflict and storms. That's because he is with us, and he is greater than anything we may face or are going through. Jesus told us:

“My peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your heart be troubled and do not be afraid.” (John 14:27, niv)

His peace doesn't promise the absence of conflict – not in this world, anyway. His peace is his own presence in your life no matter what you go through. The Prince of Peace can be present in your life, and he brings peace *while you are in* things that would otherwise trouble your heart or make you afraid. That's the advent promise of peace – he shall be called Immanuel, God with us.

Mary's response to the arrival of Christ was to trust him. That's it. She trusted that in her oppressive place in the world, in the chaos of her personal life, she trusted that the result of God's promise would be for her good, and so she was at peace.

Perhaps today you need to change your definition of peace. You need to quit spending your energy chasing away or running from the stuff around you and instead accept the presence of God in your life, right now, just the way things are. You'll have peace with God in the midst of your challenges. Start seeking God instead of escaping circumstances. Trust that he will work for good in your life; he will take care of you, protect you and provide for you.

Will it be easy? No. It certainly wasn't for Mary. Let me tell you – when Christ enters your life, he's going to upset some things. It may result in more challenges. But you will have his presence with you, and you will survive and thrive in the midst of it all because you will have his peace.

There were many things that Mary understood were going to happen, but in other ways she was only beginning to comprehend all that Christ's arrival would mean for her. Either way – she was grateful for his presence in her life, and she trusted him. She was and would be at peace in everything.

May we know and experience the same.