

Nothing is Impossible: #morepeace

Luke 1:26-56

December 6, 2020

The Advent and Christmas stories of scripture include frequent appearances by angels who announce a new mission for those called by God. The appearance of an angel is startling, provoking fear and trembling, or awe and wonder. Given their tendency to surprise humans, the angels are quick to proclaim, "Do not be afraid."

Today the angel Gabriel appears to a young teen named Mary living in a small village named Nazareth. Her arranged marriage to Joseph finds her in a year of betrothal prior to marriage. Mary would be anticipating children during her marriage, but not before! However, God has something different in mind. Mary is baffled about how this is to take place. If this indeed comes to pass, Joseph could reject her, and she would be the object of scorn and humiliation from her family and villagers.

If I were in Mary's sandals, I think I would have protested this unexpected, sudden change in my well-planned reality. I would be extremely reluctant and frightened. "But this is not the order in which this is to happen. What will people think of me? This will ruin my life and the child's life."

If such thoughts crossed Mary's mind, they are not recorded. Once the angel responds to her mild protests, Mary senses that this indeed is the call of God and she consents. She moves beyond denial of such an impossibility to acceptance of God's purpose for her life. She is at peace in offering herself. "Here I am, the Lord's humble servant. As you have said, let it be done to me."

Mary is not left alone in this new adventure. The angel promises that the Holy Spirit will come upon her. As Mary inhales the Holy Spirit, she exhales her fears. As she breathes in peace, she releases anxiety. As her womb fills with the Holy Child, her heart is filled with peace. As she lives into the possibilities of God, her soul is marked by faith.

Mary's inner peace enables her to participate willingly in God's activity in her life. She recognizes that the child will be an instrument of God's liberating power in the world. He will be the long-awaited Prince of Peace who will establish justice for all God's people. He will level the playing field so that the hungry are filled with good things and the lowly lifted in status. Mary's inner peace empowers her to believe that God can make the impossible possible.

I am amazed at Mary's faith and trust in God. She is probably between the ages of 11 and 13, and yet she exhibits such spiritual maturity. Clearly, she is well grounded in her faith tradition. She demonstrates great trust, making herself open and available to God's purposes.

Trust is a gift offered at God's initiative. We understand grace as a gift of God. Faith also originates as an unsolicited gift of God's intervention. God reaches out to us, not to coerce, but to promise and to inspire faith. Think about our own faith journeys. What messengers of God nurture the seeds of faith in our lives - parents, grandparents, friends, neighbors, Sunday school teachers? What experiences opened our hearts to faith in God – church camp, choral music, mission projects, a personal crisis? They showed us the pathway of faith. They modeled a life of discipleship. They inspired us to make ourselves open and available to God's purposes. Through these persons and experiences, God was taking the initiative to create and nurture the gift of faith in us, in preparation for when we would make faith our own.

In looking back at my childhood and youth, several faithful people in my home church cultivated the gift of faith in me through their genuine interest in my life, their guiding counsel, and the opportunities they provided. These missionaries of Christ tilled the soil of my spirit, planted seeds, watered them until I opened myself to trust God's presence and promises for myself. Mary undoubtedly had similar models of faith in her life, preparing her heart for this moment when she would consent to become the mother of the Son of God.

God works by invitation to inspire our trust. God is not coercive, but lovingly offers an invitation and then patiently waits until we choose to trust. Mary expresses her commitment with the words, "Let it be to me according to your word." She entrusts herself to the God of extraordinary possibilities.

Mary's commitment does not mean that all will go smoothly. This divine commission is a grand disruption in Mary's life, altering not only the present but also her future. It is a frame bending experience for Mary. Jesus will not be known for his magnificent carpentry, as was Joseph. However, Mary's son will impact his community, the known world, and the world to come in ways that his mother never could imagine. Mary gives herself to this new way of being, to a fresh way of seeing, trusting herself to the call and guidance of God.

You've probably heard of possibility thinking. It is the willingness to see possibilities everywhere instead of limitations. There are benefits to possibility thinking, especially if the thoughts are translated into action.

Mary is practicing possibility trusting. She opens herself, even risks herself, in trust to God. In saying, "let it be with me," there is a sense of surrender. Mary releases her inhibitions and freely trusts God.

Consider all the fears that could haunt Mary. The fear of being part of something that had no precedent in creation, much less in her life. The fear of wondering, "Why me?" The fear of not knowing the end result of what this will mean for her life and her child in the years to come. We know that their lives were not without risk and suffering. But at this moment, Mary trusts in God and opens herself to receive the future, whatever it brings. She trusts in holy possibilities for good.

What fears haunt us? Fear that the vaccine won't arrive in time to prevent our loved ones from being infected with Covid-19. Concern that ongoing isolation will drive people into deeper depression, even despair. Fear that the economy will collapse leaving multitudes more adrift without employment, housing, health care, food. Anxiety that our nation will remain entrenched in divisiveness over moral issues such as poverty and racism that matter deeply to God.

Mary invites us to cope with our fears by living into "possibility trusting." She invites us to take the risk, as she did, of opening ourselves to trust holy possibilities for our lives and the lives of those whom we love. How is God calling us to participate in God's holy purposes and even transform the impossible into the possible?

Possibility trusting might prompt us to develop relationships with or advocacy on behalf of those on the margins, those who are different from us. The leap of trust might call us to action that is not necessarily popular, just as Jesus tended to rile the Temple establishment in his day. Trusting that with God all things are possible, we might dare to imagine a healthier, meaningful future for those who have been devastated by this pandemic. Possibility trusting envisions a spirit of unity and cooperation right now that rallies people to follow public health guidelines, sacrifice personal desires, and halt the deadly surge putting so many lives at risk. It is possible, if we participate with one another and with the will of God for the common good of all.

Peace comes to Mary as she places her trust in God and the holy possibilities God desires. As Mary inhales the Holy Spirit, she exhales her fears. As she breathes in peace, she releases anxiety. As her womb fills with the Holy Child, her heart is filled with peace. As she lives into the possibilities of God, her soul is marked by faith.

Trust is a gift of God. God takes the initiative in inviting us into faith. With the release of fear, we find ourselves participating in God's activity in our lives. With possibility trusting, we open ourselves to participate in God's holy purposes for our lives and for others.

With Mary, may we find peace by daring to trust in God who can make the impossible possible. May we be messengers of peace who participate in the holy possibilities of God.

Peaceful Presence, we long to breathe deep of your peace. Your majestic presence reminds us that your power is at work in ways unknown to us, always working for good in the world and in our lives. Your comforting presence reminds us that in every hardship or sadness or challenge, you are one with us, massaging our wounds and anointing us with healing balm. Your guiding presence reminds us that you walk with us always, even when we stray, nudging us toward healthy pathways for our lives and for others. Your loving presence embraces us even when we feel unlovable and when we are unloving, for your love is deep and wide and unending. In your holy presence, we stand in awe, for your goodness exceeds our comprehension.

We lift to you those relationships and situations in which our hearts are not at peace. Melt the hardness which causes tension and free us for loving encounters. We open our hearts to your guidance that we might live in harmony.

We lift to you national and international situations that are thick with tension and animosity. Break through the hostility with your presence and lead us toward peace. Arm us with wisdom and compassion that we might embrace one another with the true peace of Christ.

Walk with those living with health challenges. Help them claim your peaceful presence walking with them through the struggles. Renew the strength of caregivers that they might be instruments of your grace and peace. Abide with all who deeply feel the absence of loved ones. Embrace them and fill the void with your peace.

Weave your peace into the hearts, minds, and bodies of health care workers, teachers, delivery drivers, farm laborers, public health officials, essential workers and all who work on behalf of us all.

In his coming anew, may the Holy Child of Bethlehem evoke within us love for one another, compassion for those who suffer, and hearts at peace. Amen.