

Wesley United Methodist Church

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Angels Among Us

Text: Luke 1:26-56

Title: Nothing is Impossible: #morepeace

I seriously doubt that anyone would currently describe our world as being at peace. It seems that not a day goes by without us hearing about an attack on civilians in some country – and recently a couple of those have even involved people worshipping in their church or mosque.

The Roman Empire in which Mary lived proclaimed what we know as the Pax Romana – or Roman Peace. It was a period of a little more than 200 years during which there was a general peace throughout the world – and a minimal military expansion. This was peace – or absence of war – primarily because most of the then known world was under Roman Rule. It has been said that “For Rome, it was always about peace, but always about peace through victory, peace through war, peace through violence.”ⁱ

Despite the general peace of the time, life was not peaceful. It was not easy to be a Jew. Although the Jews were generally tolerated by Rome, there were also dangers and people were looking for the Messiah – the one who would be sent by God, who would come and who many hoped would lead a revolt against the Roman government and bring true freedom for the Jewish people.

It was into this climate that an angel came to Mary – a young woman, engaged to Joseph, and told her that she would bear a child and this child would be the one who would save Israel. For Mary, this announcement was more than problematic. Without going into all the details of early Jewish marriage customs, being pregnant meant that Mary could be stoned to death as an adulteress or at least greatly humiliated if Joseph rejected

her. Next week, we will look more at how her fiancé Joseph responded to this news, but today, we look at Mary's response.

What is remarkable to me, miraculous even, is Mary's response to the angel's message. It appears that rather than spending her time arguing with the angel – rather than spending her time worrying about what Joseph and her parents would say – Mary heard the word from the angel – the announcement that her life was about to change in incredible and unforeseen ways, and her response was, "Let it be."

Mary's response allowed her to move from "how can this be" and denial into an acceptance of "what is" or "what will be". Mary accepted the words of the angel – the messenger – and began to live into her new future. This allowed God to use her in a powerful way.

We often spend so much time wishing things were not the way they actually are. Often, we spend a lot of time and energy wishing that things were different, or denying the way that things are, waiting passively for things to change for us for the better. Elizabeth Kubler Ross identified five stages of grief that people generally experience but many of these stages seem to apply to many profound changes in our lives. We tend to go through periods of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance. With that acceptance comes a peace that allows us to move on and to say "yes" to life even when things are not ideal.

I think about a time when I believed that God was giving me a message that would change my life drastically. There were many things in my life that were in an upheaval at the time, but at least I had a good job and I was managing pretty well. That was when I believed that God was calling me into pastoral ministry. At first, I went through the denial stage – telling God all the reasons why this couldn't be, why it wouldn't work, why it

was impossible. I even became angry at God for trying to interfere with my delicately balanced life. Eventually I started to make bargains with God – “Look, I’ll give this a try and then you’ll see that this isn’t right.” Once I finally came to the point of acceptance, I was amazed at how peaceful I felt and how more energy I then had for moving forward and dealing with the unknown.

In today’s Scripture, Mary seems to go right from denial – “This is impossible! How can this be?” – to acceptance and the peace that comes with that. When we come to the acceptance stage, when we accept what is, we are able to use our energy to live into the “what’s next”. Instead of waiting for things to be more peaceful, we can also become the ones to offer more peace.

At first look, we might think there is only one angel or one messenger from God in the story we heard today, but if we pay attention, we might notice other messengers. When Mary went to visit her cousin Elizabeth, Elizabeth immediately began to prophesy, to speak words from God. Elizabeth became a messenger as well. Elizabeth repeats the message that has been given to Mary. Elizabeth witnesses to the child that is within Mary – to the destiny of this child. In case, Mary had begun to have any doubts at all, Elizabeth reconfirmed what the angel had told Mary.

Mary, also became a messenger. She offered a song of justice and peace on earth that would be accomplished, not like the Roman peace by violence and control, but peace that would come when the oppressed are lifted up, when all persons have the necessities of life. It’s a different vision of peace – different from the absence of war. The scriptural view of peace is peace through justice rather than peace through victory.

I know that in our world today, that vision of peace on earth – peace through justice and fairness, peace through grace and mercy, peace through hope, and love has not come to be. Still the angel voices call us to this peace. Still the angel voices call us to be peacemakers in our world.

This week, following the killing of over 300 people in a mosque in Egypt, Bishop Devadhar wrote a message in response to this. In it, he wrote, “May we all seek to be peacemakers, beginning within ourselves, as we reconcile our own bitterness and anger toward others, and then seek to carry that peace out into the world around us. And may we remember the good news: the light shines in the darkness ... and the darkness will never overcome it.”ⁱⁱ

I think of the words of a familiar hymn, “Let there be peace of earth, and let it begin with me. Let there be peace on earth, the peace that was meant to be. With God our creator, children all are we. Let us walk with each other in perfect harmony.

“Let peace begin with me; let this be the moment now. With every step I take, let this be my solemn vow: to take each moment and live each moment in peace eternally. Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me.”ⁱⁱⁱ

I believe that there are angels among us. We can be messengers of peace in the face of fear, for nothing is impossible with God.

ⁱ Borg, Marcus J & Crossan, John Dominic. First Christmas, p.65 Loc 962 e-book

ⁱⁱ Devadhar, Bishop Sudarshana. Message sent to New England Annual Conference, Nov. 24, 2017.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mille, Sy * Jackson, Jill “Let There Be Peace on Earth” , United Methodist Hymnal #431