

Advent – Season of Light

PEACE

Luke 1:26-38

1. When God moves, it can be frightening.

2. It's okay to question.

3. Peace comes through submission.

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Michael O'Neill

Illuminate: Peace **Advent 2021** *Luke 1:26-38*

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail."

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her. (Luke 1:26-38, niv)

That passage might be a familiar one to many of us, but whether it's the first or the fiftieth time you've heard it, it is still filled with moving and inspiring events and wonderful, powerful meaning for us. This morning, as we are Illuminating the Peace of Christmas, let's learn from this amazing event.

As Alyssa read that story, couldn't you feel the gut churning of both excitement and anxiety when the angel appeared to Mary? Mary was likely a teenager, living in a town that was so small it was barely on the map. If Jesus hadn't been born there, no one today would even know it ever existed. But the angel Gabriel Himself appeared to that teen girl in that small town. And as we read the story, we realize that...

1. When God *moves*, it can be *frightening*.

I think it would be pretty frightening to have this angelic apparition appear to you in the middle of the night. After all, remember when the angel appeared to Zechariah in the first part of this chapter? Six months earlier, Zechariah was a priest, serving in the Temple, in

the Holy of Holies, when the same angel Gabriel appeared to him. If there's *any* place that you'd *expect* to see something like that, it would be in the Temple Holy of Holies, and yet when Gabriel appeared to Zech in the Temple, the poor guy nearly wet himself; so imagine how frightening it might be to Mary.

It's not just the appearance, though, it was the circumstances, too, that would've been frightening to Mary. You see, Mary was engaged to Joseph. In those times, an engagement was as strong as the commitment of marriage itself. The engagement period lasted a year, and if an engaged spouse died during that year, the other was considered a widow. If one were to break the engagement, it required a legal divorce. So Mary was still a virgin – that part wouldn't be consummated until the wedding day. So for Mary to suddenly become pregnant – nobody would believe her! The Old Testament penalty for being unfaithful in an engagement or marriage was stoning: to be taken outside the town and stoned to death. It was *that* serious, so it would ruin Mary, and disgrace Joseph, for their entire lives. Even if she *did* tell people the *real* reason that she was pregnant – that God made her that way – she would be ridiculed and determined to be a horrible liar or a lunatic. Sometimes when God moves, it doesn't always make sense to us, and it can be a very frightening thing.

There's a story from the Old Testament when Moses had given the people the Ten Commandments from the mountain, and then the people heard the thunder and saw the lightning and the mountain covered in smoke and they heard the trumpets, they were all frightened and backed away from the mountain. They were afraid of God (Exodus 20). It can be frightening when we see God moving because he can be big and powerful and totally out of our control. But it can also be frightening because he will likely ask us to do things that are way out of our comfort zone, and might seem foolish to others.

What is God asking you to do that might frighten you? God wants to work in powerful ways through you. God wants to bless others and change history through you. Are you too afraid to let him?

Imagine you are Mary, and you are having this encounter; wouldn't it be a little hard to believe? Notice something interesting in the story – when Gabriel tells Mary, she basically says, "How in the world could this possibly be?" Which brings up the second thing we can learn from this passage...

2. It's ***okay*** to ***question***.

Somehow, we've gotten the idea that we are not allowed to question God when he's doing something in our lives that is frightening. I don't know where we get that idea, because we see people asking God questions all through the Bible: Moses, the prophets, Esther, David, Mary, Thomas, Paul, even Jesus. And none of those people were punished for asking questions.

Granted, there are a few times in the Bible that people *are* punished for what *seems* like asking questions, but if you look closely at those – it's not the question that's the problem. Look at Zechariah, the high priest who would become the father of John the Baptist. He *was* punished. Why?

In this chapter, right before the story of Mary, we learn of Zechariah and Elizabeth. The

two of them were very old and past the age of childbearing, but the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah and told him that he and Elizabeth were going to get pregnant (*together*, unlike Mary, who was still a virgin). And remember that Zechariah also questioned the angel. In verse 18, Zechariah said, “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man, and my wife is well along in years.” That doesn’t sound too much different than what Mary asked in verse 34: she said, “How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?” What’s the difference? Well, if you read the story, Zechariah gets *punished* for asking the question, and isn’t able to speak for nine months until his son John is born. Mary isn’t punished at all. Mary isn’t reprimanded in the least by the angel. So what’s the difference? One scholar says it this way: Mary...would have every reason to question the validity of the message (from the angel). Yet her question seems to be more for understanding the process than of accepting its truthfulness – “Given what you say, how will it happen, since I am a virgin?”¹

The point is this: Zechariah questioned whether God could even do what he said. His question revealed a lack of faith in God. Mary didn’t question *God*; she was asking how God was going to do it. Zechariah questioned *if* God could even do it; Mary questioned *how* God would do it. Her question revealed faith in God and curiosity, Zechariah’s question revealed that he didn’t think God could do it.

So, when it comes to us, I like what one author says: “We may believe and accept the Word from God, but when viewed through the lens of our circumstances and our understanding of the laws of nature, the plan and promise of God can appear impossible. The word given to Mary needs to be spoken into the life of every follower of Christ: “Nothing is impossible with God” (1:37). Our circumstances may make (it seem) difficult, but (God’s) Word needs to move from being intellectually believed to being the conviction of our hearts. We will face things in our lives that have no resolution, and we will see them as impossible. But when God is included in the equation, possibilities show up. Nothing is impossible with God!”²

When God moves it can be frightening, and you don’t want to be found disbelieving what God can do, but it is okay to ask for clarification. That way, you’ll be in the best position to discover that...

3. *Peace* comes through *submission*.

Mary’s response to the plan of God is incredible. She knew the potential for her own personal embarrassment and disgrace, not to mention for the man she loved. But even so, she said, “I am the Lord’s servant...May it be to me as you have said.” She knew that submission to God could lead her into some serious problems, but she did it anyway.

Mary didn’t make a promise of submission that she didn’t plan to keep. She wasn’t caught up in the emotion of the angelic encounter. We know from the story that Mary followed through on her promise with action – with continued obedience to God’s plan. *Submission*. Think about it; the angel left. There was no further word from God. There was no one else that she could talk to about it or share her thoughts or emotions or questions. Mary

¹ Ken Heer, *Luke: A Commentary for Bible Students* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2007)

² *ibid*

probably woke up the next day with more questions, but who would answer them? Who would walk with her through the days of uncertainty that lay ahead? The words of the angel would become what she hung onto: “The Lord is with you.”³ When we follow the plan of God with submission, we experience the presence of God, we benefit from the provision of God, and we receive the peace of God.

Do you need to submit to God? I know it can be frightening – believe me, I’ve had my share of frightening moments with God. It’s okay to ask God questions about it. But in the end, you either submit to God, or you don’t. If you *do*, you will experience peace like you’ve never known. What will you do?

Prayer

³ *ibid*