

Let It Be—Advent Angels 2

Luke 1:26-38

December 4, 2022

First Presbyterian, Luling

Last week was the candle of hope, and this week is the candle of peace. None of my preacher friends know where this hope-peace-love-joy candles idea came from either, but we're rolling with it this year. Looking around in our culture, I think peace is a relatively common theme for Christmas season, or Advent. It's a religiously neutral term, so it fits into civic celebrations.

Peace does appear with the angels in the Christmas stories in Scripture, just not in today's reading. In Zechariah's song last week, the last line is: "By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." The coming Messiah, for whom John the Baptist will prepare the way, will guide our feet into the way of peace. The angels announce this to the shepherds, as well. The multitude of heavenly host say "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors." Translations vary on those last few words, but peace always appears in that blessing from the angel chorus. Peace is coming, but it's not going to be easy, and not what we expect, at least in the short term.

In our neighborhood, there are of course lots of houses with Christmas decorations out in their yards. Several people have nativity scenes of one variety or another, and because I love nativity scenes, I tend to take more notice of these than I do of Santa and snowmen. Most of these outdoor nativity scenes are just a cutout of the main figures, but one house has a really interesting one. I don't know who these people are, but I like the way they set this up. There's a shed type thing, and right now that shed is empty. There are some shepherd and sheep off to one side already. No baby Jesus yet—he gets put in the manger on Christmas Eve. No wise men yet—they appear at the far side of the yard around the 25<sup>th</sup> and ever so slowly make their way to the shed, to arrive by January 6. What caught my eye the other day was off to the right side of the shed—shepherds are on the left, watching their flocks. But on the right side, there is Mary and there is Joseph, not facing each other over the manger, just out in the grass, both facing the angel. It's the Angel of Christmas, right there in the neighbor's front yard, making his announcement to Mary.

He is named as Gabriel, the same angel that appeared to Zechariah.

Gabriel's and Mary's interaction eventually leads to Mary having some peace with the situation, though it's a peace that is not without difficulty or problems; it's the deep peace that comes with aligning herself with God's will. Let's take a closer look.

Greetings, favored one! That's how Gabriel greets her. What has she done to be favored? Nothing. Who is she to be favored? She's no one, just a girl from a little town no one's heard of. She's apparently going about her normal everyday business when Gabriel appears. Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you. This sounds nice enough, but it didn't give Mary any peace right away. She was puzzled and troubled, and she starts to wonder already what is happening.

Gabriel has to say, right away, just like with Zechariah, and just like with Joseph and the shepherds, "Don't be afraid." Again he tells her she has found favor with God. God has chosen her to have a son named Jesus, the Son of the Most High. We're used to hearing these words, and the poetry of them fills our souls with peace, because we know this is good tidings of great joy that Gabriel is bringing to Mary. But for Mary herself, this was unsettling and most assuredly did not fill her soul with peace.

She asks Gabriel how this can happen, because it's impossible. And he says, the Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Gabriel has good news, but before Mary can get to the good news, she has some difficult days to live through. This Holy Spirit and power of the Most High is not just overshadowing, but overwhelming, and upending, and quite possibly dangerous for an unwed teenager. This is not peace, at least not in the way we normally think of peace as freedom from worry and fretting.

Though she doesn't ask Gabriel for a sign, she receives one anyway. He tells her about Elizabeth's pregnancy.

And then Mary somehow, out of this unsettling appearance and conversation, retrieves some peace. Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word. That's the peace of knowing you are in line with God's plans. It doesn't come easily. It won't come easily—the days and years ahead will be hard. It's deeper than days and years, though. It's a peace that, as Paul will write to the Philippians which I read this morning, a peace that passes all understanding.

Mary's song, which follows her visit with Elizabeth, also describes a peace that will come, a deep peace that comes from alignment with God's purposes, but a peace that will disturb and trouble in the meantime. In the tradition of Hannah, and of the prophets, she sings both of herself and of her people. In choosing her,

God is lifting up the lowly. But God also scatters the proud and brought down the powerful and sent the rich away empty. In choosing Mary, in coming in Jesus, God is turning the world upside down, so there will be peace for all people, not just the lofty but also the lowly.

May God's peace, deep peace, the peace that passes all understanding, be with us all. Amen.