

Luke 1:26-38

December 6, 2020

All I Want for Christmas Is...Peace

How do you feel about limbo?

(picture of people playing limbo at a party)

Not that kind of limbo. The kind of limbo that makes you feel uncomfortable...although, I guess, that kind of limbo would make a good number of us uncomfortable. What I am really asking about, though, is how do you feel about limbo in the sense of a period of uncertainty.

At least once a week, I find myself acknowledging someone's, suffering by saying, "I hear you. Being in limbo is a horrible place to be." Sometimes I say this in response to a dear one waiting for test results. Or waiting to find out if they got the job or if they still have a job. Other times, though, limbo is that space between the dilemma and the decision, when you've come to a fork in the road and there is a choice to be made. Limbo can be particularly uncomfortable when the choice involves being called from what we had planned into something completely unknown. That's where Mary finds herself in today's text.

I find that, very often, Disney does a pretty good job of dealing with complicated life moments like this. In the 2019 animated movie, Frozen 2, the main character, Elsa, gives voice to what it feels like to be in that limbo space, when she is called by a mysterious voice. At this point in the movie, she doesn't know what or who this siren's voice is or exactly what it is calling her to do. What she does know is this was not what she had planned.

In the movie, Elsa sang, "I don't need something new. I'm afraid of what I'm risking if I follow you." I think those lyrics would have resonated with Mary as she listened to Gabriel. After all, she had a plan. Her plan was to do what her family expected her to do. The promise had been made. She would marry Joseph. Hopefully, they would have children...in due time. Certainly not right now. That was impossible. Why would she agree to something that would mess all of that up? Even considering what the angel was talking about was scary.

And just as Gabriel, said to Zechariah in last week's text, he said to Mary, "Do not be afraid." A colleague and I joked this week about these two angelic visits. We decided it would have been cool for the author of Luke to have written in a story

about God giving Gabriel a good talking to after the incident with Zechariah in the temple. We imagined God saying something like, “Gabriel, when you visit Mary, cut her some slack. She will be afraid. What you are telling her will be hard for her to believe. Do not, under any circumstances, render her mute. When you did that to Zechariah, that was not okay.”

Gabriel did not render Mary mute, even when she questioned how she, a virgin, could possibly have a baby. But in a lot of ways, these two stories are similar. Both Zechariah and Mary were visited by an angel who had a message. They were told not to be afraid and Zechariah and Mary had found favor with God. They would both have a son, and they were each given a name for their son. In some respects, it seems like Luke just copied and pasted the story of the foretelling of John’s birth, changed some names and presto, the story of Jesus’ birth was foretold.

But there are some important differences between these stories. As I mentioned last week, the story of Elizabeth and Zechariah is purposely written in the tradition of similar stories in the Hebrew Bible. The story of Zechariah and Elizabeth mirrors the stories of couples who were childless, but eventually had children, like Abraham and Sarah and Hannah and Elkanah, for example. These similarities were important to Luke’s narrative because he wanted his audience to understand his story as a continuation and fulfillment of God’s promises in the Hebrew Bible.

But, in the story of Mary and Joseph, Luke changes things. The couple was not barren or old. Quite the opposite, in fact. Mary was a young virgin. Why wouldn’t Luke have continued the narrative thread and made Mary and Joseph like the others? After all, in Jewish tradition, it was divinely miraculous for ordinary marital intercourse between aged and barren parents to result in conception. Why did Mary have to be a virgin? Why not follow the Jewish narrative tradition? This is part of what Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan tackle in their book, *The First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus’ Birth*.

And what Borg and Crossan came up with is that a divine conception, like Abraham and Sarah’s and the others, was not as divine as a divine *virginal* conception. For his story, Luke needed Jesus’ conception to be uber divine. And not just more divine than the stories in the Hebrew Bible, but more divine than all others, including and particularly the stories of the Romans.

In the myths of the Greco-Roman tradition, gods physically had intercourse with humans and the result was super-human beings. This is how the Romans believed their emperors came to be. This was true for Emperor Caesar Augustus, who was the Roman emperor in Jesus' day, for example. This made these men part human and part god. The Romans even referred to their emperors as "sons of god." These were impressive tales to be sure, but more impressive was the story of Mary who was a virgin before, during, and remained a virgin after conception. This made her divine conception different from and greater than all others, Jewish and Greco Roman. The child she would carry was special.

Another thing that made Mary's story different was that, unlike the women impregnated by the Greco Roman Gods, Mary was given a choice. God gave Mary the opportunity to choose whether she wanted to be part of what God was doing or not. It doesn't exactly say that in the text, but Gabriel announced that she would become pregnant, answered her question, told her about Elizabeth, kind of as proof that God was doing miraculous things, and didn't leave her until she said, "Here am I, a servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." She said yes.

Mary's response to this limbo moment is especially remarkable because unlike Elizabeth and Zechariah and the couples I've mentioned from the Hebrew Bible, who were childless and hoped for divine intervention, Mary did not. The truth is, it wasn't Mary and Joseph who needed divine intervention, it was the people of Israel. For Luke, Mary's yes was a yes to partnering with God to bring forth a real Son of God who would save them all from the one who claimed to be a son of god, Caesar, and all the ones like him.

I wonder what happened in those moments with Gabriel that made Mary say yes. You may be thinking, who cares? She said yes. We should just be content that Mary said yes because she was faithful. Why can't it just be that. Well, it could. But if it was, would Mary's story be one we can relate to? Or should we just put Mary and her story on a pedestal, or worse, sweep it to the side as something that has no bearing on what our lives are like? I think exploring how Mary might have gotten from afraid and confused to "Here am I," might help us navigate our own limbo moments and seasons.

So, what do you think it was for Mary?

Was it the news that Elizabeth was pregnant? Was that proof that God was up to something? Did that entice her to say yes? Or was it Gabriel's insistence that nothing is impossible for God? Maybe.

But I kind of lean toward what Gabriel said all the way back in verse 28, "...The Lord is with you." Not only did Gabriel say these words, but his mere presence underlined it. The reason I think this may have been what enabled Mary to say yes is that, in my own life, in moments of limbo, in moments of indecision and unknown-ness, it has been the realization that I was not alone, that God was present, that has given me the courage to decide, to move from the place of limbo that we all experience from time to time, and step into the unknown. Saying yes has been easier for me when I have been able to sense God's presence.

I don't think I'm any different than most people. I think human beings, in general, are a little braver when someone goes with them. A person is more willing to sign up for that marathon if a friend does it with them. A child is more willing to try the roller coaster if a parent rides it with them. An employee is willing to do the right thing if their employer backs them up. We can all do hard things and make hard decisions, knowing God does not leave us alone. And when we gather ourselves up and do the thing we are called to, when we finally make the decision to say yes to what God is doing, often there is a sense of peacefulness about that.

I realized this week that I talk more about peace in the world than I do about inner peace. I admit I think more about faith in terms of how our faith affects the world, rather than how it affects me personally. But the truth is, we will never have peace in the world until we have peace within ourselves.

A few years ago, a short cartoon, called *Peace on Earth*, circulated. It was created by MGM in 1939, when WW II had just broken out in Europe. In a post-apocalyptic world populated only by animals, two squirrels ask their grandad who the "men" are in the lyrics of "Peace on Earth, goodwill towards men" in the Christmas song "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day." The old squirrel gives the youngsters a history lesson about human beings. This lesson features the many ways in which humans have struggled, hated one another and been at war with each other and themselves. If you take time to watch the film, there are some eerily familiar themes, some real 2020 themes.

Grandad squirrel tells the story of humans who fought over and over until there were only two soldiers left in all the world. Instead of surrendering their meaningless sides at that point, the two continue their skirmish until both are dead, thus eradicating humanity from the globe. Even after everyone else was gone, the two soldiers couldn't manage to work it out, to find peace within themselves, so life could go on. The moral to the story is peace within us must come first, otherwise squirrels are going to inherit the earth.

Film reference: <https://filmschoolrejects.com/peace-on-earth-is-the-christmas-message-we-need-this-year-23473dfca209/>

And right now, I know there are a whole lot of us that feel anything but peaceful. We feel afraid. We feel angry and isolated. We feel sad, frustrated, and hopeless. Peace seems so far away. But it isn't. It is right in front of us, around us, and in us.

The story of Mary and Gabriel reminds us that, even in the midst of limbo, in the midst of not knowing what is next, in the midst of all of the messiness of our feelings, God is present. And if we can grab onto that, we can find peace. And just maybe that peace can cause us to consider that there is evidence of "God with us" everywhere. Although, these glimpses of God are likely not clad in sparkly wings and glimmering halos, they are dressed in scrubs and business casual. They wear raincoats and swimsuits, overalls and cowboy boots, yoga pants and pajamas. These angels look a lot like you and me.

And I think that is what Advent peace is all about. It is this awareness that every day, in many ways, God chooses to draw near to us, to dwell with us. The story of Gabriel and Mary, even the story of Jesus' birth, are stories of a God who chooses to use the ordinary to do something extraordinary. I believe God wants us to be about the work of bringing peace to our little corner of the world. To do that, we have to get better at recognizing "God with us" in our neighbors, in our family, and even in ourselves. I think when that happens, we will know peace. And then the world will know peace...and the squirrels...they will just be squirrels. Amen.