

## Scripture Lesson: Luke 1:26-38 The Birth of Jesus Foretold

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, <sup>27</sup>to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup>And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.'\* <sup>29</sup>But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup>The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. <sup>31</sup>And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. <sup>32</sup>He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. <sup>33</sup>He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' <sup>34</sup>Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?\*' <sup>35</sup>The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born\* will be holy; he will be called Son of God. <sup>36</sup>And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. <sup>37</sup>For nothing will be impossible with God.' <sup>38</sup>Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

## Sermon: I Heard the Bells of Peace on Earth

We hear it a lot this time of year- well wishes for Peace on Earth, but there is a cartoon where Charlie Brown says to his nemesis, Lucy, is it something that has to be just this time of year? Shouldn't we be striving for it all the time?

Lucy calls him a fanatic for that type of thinking 😞-poor Charlie Brown. However, sisters and brothers we honestly are called to strive for peace and kindness in this world all year round. We are called to that as it is something God wants for us, and provides for us in a child born in Bethlehem.

Hear these words given by the prophet Micah about the One of Peace. Micah 5:2-5a <sup>2</sup> *But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. <sup>3</sup> Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labour has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. <sup>4</sup> And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; <sup>5</sup> and he shall be the one of peace.* Those words were given, and 700 years later, we read how Mary receives this message from Gabriel, <sup>31</sup> *And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. <sup>33</sup> He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.* The One of Peace is on his way through Mary.

And how does she respond? *'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.* Mary welcomes the child, Mary welcomes the promised one, Mary welcomes God's work in her life and in the life of this world. She's not the only one open to what God can and will do. So is Elizabeth. Because after this experience, Mary goes to visit her cousin, Elizabeth who is also with child, John the Baptist and the text says, *Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit <sup>42</sup> and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. <sup>43</sup> And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? <sup>44</sup> For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. <sup>45</sup> And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'* Elizabeth affirms what is taking place in Mary's life. And it's not like God had told Elizabeth this would occur. Nowhere in the gospels does God or an angel have a conversation with Elizabeth of what is about to take place. If you remember her husband, Zechariah is told, but then made mute due to his questioning of God's will. All Elizabeth knew was she was with child and Mary was with child and the only way that happened was by the blessing of God, whom she praises.

And upon hearing that praise, Mary sings, *"My soul magnifies the Lord, <sup>47</sup> and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, <sup>48</sup> for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; <sup>49</sup> for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.*

What I love about this story is the responses, the reactions of everyone involved. From Mary saying "here I am, let it be" to Elizabeth's proclamation of blessing and joy, to Mary's song of thanksgiving and praise. All their responses are a reaction to what God is doing in and through them.

So my question for us to ponder this second week of Advent is, what is your reaction to what God is doing in and through you? Because in Jesus God is at work to give you peace.

At his last meal with his friends Jesus shares these words for all of us to hear and to know. He says, <sup>27</sup> *Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. John 14:27* Jesus gives us peace, the kind of peace that proclaims kindness all year long. The kind of peace that can fill you and carry you through your days. The kind of peace that others may learn from when we share his peace-making practices to those around us. Such as written about in the book of Ephesians, *Be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love. Always keep yourselves united in the Holy Spirit, and bind yourselves together with peace. (Eph 4:2-4)*. Or Colossians, *You must make allowance for each other's faults and forgive the person who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others...And let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts. For as members of one body you are all called to live in peace. (Col 3:13-15)* That's how God's peace is known throughout the year, in how we act and share with others Christ's humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, and love.

I've always appreciated this writing: "Peace- it does not mean to be in a place where there is no noise, trouble, or hard work. It means to be in the midst of all those things and still be calm in your heart" (author unknown). When we open our hearts to God's peace revealed and given to us in Jesus, then we live into that peace with all that we are and all that we do, so that we along with Mary and Elizabeth bring the peace in this dark world.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow lived in this country in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and was one of the country's most respected scholars and poets of his day. However he went through some very difficult years in his personal life in the 1860's . Just 3 months after the opening battle of the Civil War, Longfellow's wife, Fanny, died, due to a fire accident. This was a devastating loss. For months Longfellow wrote nothing but struggles and sorrow in his personal journal. Like Christmas that year, the first without Fanny, he wrote it was "inexpressibly sad". On the first anniversary of her death he jotted, "perhaps someday God will give me peace". On the second Christmas after Fanny's death. Longfellow stated that a Merry Christmas "is no more for me". Then in 1863, just before the third Christmas after his wife's death, Longfellow received news that his son, Charles, had been severely wounded in battle while fighting for the Union Army. So Longfellow traveled south in search of his son, found him, loaded him onto a train, and brought him home. It was during that train journey that he heard church bells in their travels and penned this Christmas poem called "Christmas Bells" that expresses the emotional struggle he and this country were facing at that time with the Civil War, a time filled with loss, struggles, and *no peace*. The poem reads, "I heard the bells on Christmas Day, their old familiar carols play, and wild and sweet the words repeat of peace on earth, good will to men." It goes on, "and in despair I bowed my head; there is no peace on earth I said. For hate is strong, and mocks the song of peace on earth, good will to men." We can't help but hear Longfellow's anguish and pain, yet sorrow does not have the final word, because as you continue to read this poem Longfellow catches a glimpse of what Christ can bring. You see, Longfellow knew that the tradition of church bells related to the tradition of a shepherd's bell that calls upon its lost sheep. If a sheep is lost, they have been trained to hear a certain bell rung, in order to find their way back to their beloved shepherd. Recalling that lesson, and hearing the bells, Longfellow wrote and ends the poem with this, "Then pealed the bells more loud and deep; God is not dead, nor doth he sleep! The wrong shall fail, the right prevail, with peace on earth, good will to men." To this day that writing moves many of us who recognize how far away peace may seem for the world, filled with violence and terror, but not so much when we receive the peace of God given in Jesus Christ the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for us, his sheep, and whose Christmas bells beckon us, calling us to a peace that will not let our hearts be troubled nor be afraid. A peace in knowing, believing, trusting, that God is at work among us. Just like Mary and Elizabeth, God is at work in you and me in bringing the peace of Christ to this world.

Let us pray: Loving God, as we continue in this Advent season, we open all the difficult challenges in our lives to the calming power of Jesus' peace . Prepare our hearts to be transformed by you, that we may share that peace with others, in your name. Amen.