

Great Expectations

Luke 1: 47-55; Luke 1: 39-55

I want to begin today by sharing with you today a poem written by Ann Wiens called 'Searching for Shalom'. She writes,

I keep searching for shalom
Drawing my water from one well to another,
But still I thirst for the shower of blessing that is shalom.
I yearn for life to be just, merciful and peaceful,
But the streets are filled with daily deaths of spirit and of flesh,
But no shalom.
I keep searching for shalom away from crowds and commotion,
But peace and quiet don't blot the pain of broken hearts and broken bodies.
I keep searching for shalom, thinking perhaps I'll find it in a quiet field of
flowers
But still the innocent are trampled.
I keep searching for shalom standing in holy places, sitting among saints
Surely in the sanctuary I will find shalom
I keep searching for shalom, but holy places are not magic,
Good works and printed prayers don't guarantee shalom,
Beyond cathedral walls and above ethereal music
The blaring din of death persists
Back in the streets the people walk in darkness
I keep searching for shalom
I have pursued and sought it
Have I looked in all the wrong places?
What is this bonding, this glue among us, this cohesiveness that holds us in the
hope of shalom?
The longing won't die, the hope keeps emerging
Like a new sprout that preserves the stump of a felled tree
Even in the daily barrage of obscenities a new star melts into my eyes and the
promise persists.
Here in the darkness, some new light stirs within me
Here in the streets, I find shalom.
Shalom lives not in the sanctuary, but in the streets; in the chaos
On a cross is the face of Jesus that passes all understanding
The everlasting Sabbath,

Shalom.

As we prepare for the coming of Jesus, 'the Word made flesh', our direct connection to the Divine, to our Creator, we continue to reflect on expectations and making space for God's presence in our lives. Christmas Day comes with great expectations. Family gathered, love shared, delicious food and sweets, presents, laughter, joy. Many of us are realists and we know that it all comes with meltdowns, arguments, sadness, disappointment, isolation; and for many, no food, no shelter, no joy.

In Luke's gospel today, there are great expectations. Expectations of promises fulfilled, love poured out, hope realized, and companionship found. The story of Mary and Elizabeth coming together in celebration of their pregnancies. The fact that one of them was old, was suddenly to give birth to John the Baptist; the other a virgin, to give birth to Jesus, the Messiah, foreshadows the Old Testament prophecies that a new king will come to God's chosen people. And this new king will be the Prince of Peace. This king will act justly, will love with great kindness and will walk humbly with God as it is foretold by the prophet Micah. What we come to understand in this passage is that God is indeed good; God keeps promises and expectations will be realized and lived out in our lifetime.

We started the scripture today partway through the gospel of Luke, so I want to go back and give you part of the background to the story. Luke's gospel begins with the story of Zachariah and Elizabeth. Now Zachariah was a priest; he was married to Elizabeth who was a descendant of Aaron, who helped Moses with the journey of the Hebrew people coming out of exile, journeying to the promised land, and it's said that they were both righteous and lived according to God's commands. But unfortunately, even though they were righteous, even though they lived by God's commands, Elizabeth was barren and unable to conceive a child. Now while in the temple one day people outside were praying and Zachariah was also praying, when suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared to him and announced to him that his prayers were answered. His wife would bear a son and they would name him John. Now Zachariah, rightly so in that moment, was afraid and stunned and asked the angel, how will I know this is true? Now because Zachariah asked that question, because he had that moment of doubt and didn't believe, the angel of the Lord made him mute. He was no longer able to speak, so when he left the temple to go and tell his wife and all the people gathered that this miracle had happened, he was not able to share this news.

It was after that story that the angel then appeared to Mary in 6 months. And that angel gave Mary the good news that she too would conceive of a son, that she had found favour with God and thus would conceive a son, name him Jesus, and he would be the son of God. Mary too wondered, how could this be? And again, the angel assured her to not be afraid. She pondered, why was she chosen for this great task; to give birth to the son of God? What made her so special? She didn't feel qualified, she didn't feel she deserved it, she didn't want anything to do with this at first, but the angel let Mary know that her relative Elizabeth, who was of old age and

barren would also be conceiving a son; because nothing is impossible with God. That is where the scripture picked up the story today. After the angel told Mary these things, she went with haste to see Elizabeth. But the question remains, why? Why would Mary choose to go with haste when she is pregnant on a long journey to go see Elizabeth, a relative of hers, who is also going to be expecting a child. What did Mary expect by visiting her relative?

There is a lot of theological debate around the meaning of her action. Did Mary need confirmation of what she had been told? What she going to confirm that Elizabeth too had conceived a child? Did she need encouragement to continue to believe in God? Or did Mary go to Elizabeth to offer confirmation and encouragement rather than receiving it? Both women received confirmation when their babies, in their womb, leapt with joy. That leap of joy was enough for them all to know that they had been blessed. And it was clear from Elizabeth's reaction that this was not something she was expecting. She even went so far to question Mary and say, now why would Mary the mother of my Lord come to visit me? She too felt unworthy; why her? But she knew instinctively that they both had been blessed. Again, this exchange between Mary and Elizabeth affirms that we all are all chosen to be God's people. Regardless of our status, regardless of our mistakes and even when society believes that we are not worthy; God does. God calls us, God believes in us, and God is with us. Mary's song which is often referred to as the Magnificat, echoes a hymn of praise; a song of thanksgiving, it's a chant of sorts that expresses belief in God's promises being fulfilled. And on this fourth Sunday of Advent we hear words of love expressed. Love for this vulnerable child growing in Mary's belly, love for her family and love for God.

We have come here with haste today to witness and receive the good news that with God nothing is impossible. We, like Mary, are called to celebrate. Mary went with haste to share the good news with Elizabeth. They cared for one another, they supported one another; the verse right after the ones we heard today was that she stayed for 3 months. They were not afraid, for they know God was with them. So, the question for you today is this; what have you received from God? Where is the Holy Spirit at work in your life that you may not believe, that you may not think is possible? What blessings have you received and how will you sing praises to God on this day? For even in this time of great darkness, in this time of great urgency and uncertainty there is light. The promise of shalom is there. For there is peace and it's a peace that passes all understanding. All we need to do is believe. And so, the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all as we prepare to welcome this great gift, Jesus. Amen.