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Title: Christmas Promises: Peace

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If I were to ask you to write down your favorite Christmas carols, what would be on the top of your list? What do you think is the best Christmas carol in history?" There are many lists online. Some put "O Holy Night" on top; others say "Silent Night." A more secular list says "White Christmas" is the best.

"Grandma Got Run Over by a

Reindeer" is at the top of still another list, but not the greatest. It is on the worst list. I agree. What would you list as the greatest Christmas carol? Scripture offers a choice, a spontaneous carol sung by a pregnant teenager visiting her cousin. It begins "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior..." (Luke 1: 46-47)¹

On the second week of Advent, the focus is again on Mary. Today, she sings an incredible Christmas carol. It declares that Mary is at peace with the announcement that she would conceive, give birth to a son, and name him Jesus.

The carol is called the Magnificat from the first line in Latin but well before the Bible was translated into Latin, the early church sang it in the catacombs. As the liturgy of the church was developed, it became the anchor of vespers, sung to different tunes, and chanted in the Middle Ages. The Magnificat has been put to music in enormously different settings and styles, from Palestrina to Bach, from Mozart to Rutter. This Christmas carol sung by Mary is the first and continues to celebrate the promise of Christmas peace.

Mary's discovery of peace is quickly gained. If the timeline of Luke's story is followed, she sings her carol five days after her encounter with Gabriel. It is remarkable how fast Mary embraces Gabriel's announcement. When the angel reminds Mary of God's promise for humanity through the prophet Isaiah and then says to her, "'Nothing is impossible for God' 'Mary said, I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me just as you have said.'" (Luke 1:37-38) Mary says yes because she has hope in both the promises and power of God. Hope is the first promise of Christmas.

Luke says as quickly as she embraced that hope, "Mary got up and hurried to a city in the Judean highlands." (Luke 1:39) We don't know what city she went to. We simply know that it was the home of her cousin Elizabeth, somewhere in the Judean hills, which would be near Bethlehem. It was a walk of 80 and 100 miles and likely took five days.

I'm sure she used the time to process the information, to review what Gabriel told her and how it connected her with the prophet Isaiah. She would be the "young woman to bear a son and...name him Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14b). He would be "A shoot sprouting up from the stump of Jesse..." (Isaiah 11:1) Jesse's hometown was Bethlehem. As she passed that little town, thinking about Isaiah's prophecy, surely another prophet came to mind, Micah. A contemporary of Isaiah, God also spoke through him about the Messiah, saying "Bethlehem...one of the little clans of Judah... from you shall come forth for me one (who)... shall be great ...and he shall be the one of peace." (Micah 5:2,4c-5a). Did she have a clue that nine months later, above those Judean hills, a star would shine and an angel chorus would sing "...peace among those whom he favors..." (Luke 2:14)

No. How could she imagine angels singing of peace but peace was what Mary discovered. By the time she arrived and was greeted by her cousin Elizabeth, Mary was at peace. Elizabeth realizes that Mary is the young woman prophesied by Isaiah because the child within Elizabeth jumps for joy. With a loud cry she exclaims, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb." (Luke 1:42) In response, Mary sings "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor..." (Luke 1:46) Yes, peace among those whom he favors. It is a remarkable song of peace, not as something to be looked for in the future even though that is there. Rather, it was about something in the present, about something deep within her. It was the peace of God, a peace that is beyond comprehension, a peace deep within because Jesus was "in her."

To bear a child is a wonderful, miraculous gift. Any woman who has given birth acknowledges this. To carry a child is precious. But to carry God is something that truly surpasses all understanding. Heaven's door was opened and God came down to live in Mary. The omnipotent in one instant became pierceable, breakable, flesh, and blood. The one who was greater than the entire universe, whose words spoke creation into being, the one who sustains the world chooses to become tiny, to depend on the nourishment of a young girl. The creator of life was being created, given eyes, eyes, hands, feet, living within his mother Mary. He is named

Emmanuel, which means God with us but at this moment, "with us" is "in her", in Mary.

Think about all of the ways God could have come. God could have come in a pillar of fire or a dark cloud. God could have come as a conquering hero or on a cloud of glory. But God chose to come as one of us and the first destination on his itinerary was the womb of a 14-year-old poor peasant girl. Where will God go to touch the world? Look deep within Mary. Better still, look deep within yourself. What God did in Mary, He offers to us. Jesus issues a Mary level invitation to each of his followers. If you let me, I'll come live in you and you will have peace.²

Jesus grew in Mary from that day she sang that wonderful Christmas song of peace, grew and grew until the time was right. He was delivered to the world on a crazy night with animals looking on and shepherds telling of angels singing of peace. Then he grew and grew some more until he was old enough to start his ministry. Throughout that ministry, he made an invitation to his followers. I want to live in you. "Abide in me as I abide in you." (John 15:4) Remain in me and I will remain in you. I in you and you in me. Why does he say this? So that we can have peace. Peace is an insider job. It started with Mary and continued when Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled; don't be afraid" (John 14:27). The promise of Christmas is peace because it transforms our relationship with God from "with" to "in." Christmas changes the preposition.³

Before God leaving the throne room of heaven and entering the womb of Mary, God is with us. God was with Adam and Eve, walking with them in the garden. God was with Abraham and even called him a friend. God led God's people for 40 years in the wilderness with a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Parents would point to the cloud or the fire and say to their children, "See, God is with us." Even after Jesus was born, he was with his followers. He was sleeping with the disciples in the back of the boat when John begged him to calm the storm. He was with Peter walking on water when Peter sank with fear. He was with them in the upper room on the night when he was betrayed. But to us on this side of Easter, he offers something different. He wants to be in us. He makes this invitation, "Listen. I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come into you...." (Revelation 3:20)

In to you.... do you hear what Jesus is asking? He wants us to play the role of Mary in his unfolding Christmas pageant of love. He wants to dwell inside of you, to grow in you, just like he grew in Mary. The question is not, "Will God give me peace?" It is, "Will I let God come into me and be my peace?"

That's what Jesus wants to do, to come into you. Why? Not just to experience calm and serenity, but so you, like Mary can deliver him to the world. It's why he said. "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (John 20:21).

What would that look like if you allowed that to happen? It would mean that Jesus would come out in your words, your action, and your decisions. People would see Jesus in you. It would be like Elizabeth recognizing Jesus in Mary. What an incredible witness you'd be. Plus, you'd have the resources to face the challenges of life, the frustration, and anger, the betrayal and sin. You'd have the strength to deal with the threat of illness due to pandemics or cancer or heart disease. Peace gives you the calm and courage to manage the isolation that comes from the loss of community or the loss of a job, or love even life.

"This is the peace that Jesus offers us. It's not a peace that is free from tragedy, illness, death, or heartache. It is peace rooted in the trust that the life Jesus gives us is deeper, wider, stronger, and more enduring life than whatever our current circumstances are because all we see is not all that there is and the last word about us and our struggle has not yet been spoken."⁴ That's the promise of peace and it begins at Christmas

Mary discovers that peace somewhere between Nazareth and the Judean hills. She claimed it when she sang, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor..." (Luke 1:46) She was at peace with Jesus in her.

You can experience that too and maybe you have. Maybe you have felt his presence, his love, felt him growing within you. Or maybe you have been resistant to Christ living in you. There is no end to the excuses that we can come up with. I'm not good enough. I don't know enough. I don't have time. I've got other plans. Or even, I'm not sure this is true or he's even there. Mary probably could have offered all of those but she didn't. She simply trusted God and allowed him to live in her and fill her with peace.

I hope you can do that, open yourself like Mary, and trust Jesus to come to live in you. Can you? Will you? Are you able to open your heart to him, just like Mary, and let him live in you? If you will, your heart will not be troubled and neither will it be afraid, because Jesus promises to give you peace, leave you peace, a peace that it is so deep, so abiding, it is simply surpasses understanding. What a gift! What a need, now more than ever. We know it is there and it is ours to receive because it is the promise of Christmas.

¹ORTBERG, JC. Living by the word: reflections on the lectionary (D 20, 2009). Christian Century. 126, 25, 20, Dec. 15, 2009. ISSN: 0009-5281.

² Lucado, Max (2004-09-25). God Came Near (The Bestseller Collection) (pp. 7-8). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

³ Lucado, Max (2014-12-22) Oak Hills, also titled God Came Near but also from his book, Next Door Savior and poem Christ in Me, Thomas Nelson, 2009. The sermon gives form to the last third of this sermon.

⁴ Rob Bell, What We Talk about When We Talk about God