

“Sally: Seeking Real Peace”

December 23, 2018

A Charlie Brown Advent series – Advent 4

Note: We're grateful to Faith Church in Bellafonte, PA for the idea for this series.

Charlie Brown's search for meaning has taken him into conversations where he confronts the ways of the world - the desire for control, the reality of enjoying the season, and even to his little sister, Sally, who echoes the hopes of many kids (and sometimes adults!) when she says, "I've been extra good this year, so I have a long list." She is absolutely on board with the idea that getting all she can is the point of the season, but we see Charlie Brown struggle.

I was in and out of stores and on Amazon.com this week – a lot. And I've been watching the tracking so that I know when the packages arrive at our door so that I can quickly move them into hiding! But what I'm buying isn't going to bring peace. Sally might think so, but peace doesn't come from having the right stuff. Peace comes from God, who calls us to humility.

What do we want? Maybe there's a gift you'd love, but more than likely, it's not something tangible. We gathered here on Monday night for Blue Christmas, and I don't think that people were here because they were praying for the perfect gift. They were here for a lot of reasons that have nothing to do getting the right gift and everything to do with feeling God's grace, seeking God's wisdom, claiming God's love, and seeking God's peace in the midst of personal struggles.

And we're not alone. It may be difficult to even contemplate peace in the midst of a government shutdown, news of changes around the world, an "iffy" stock market, people seeking asylum at the border as we consider Jesus – born in a turbulent time and then fleeing violence for safety. But in the midst of it all, Jesus comes, and Jesus calls.

Today we hear Mary's song from Luke 1 - after the angel's visit when she's called by God to bear the Christ-child and says "yes" to God, after she receives the affirmation and encouragement from Elizabeth. Mary sings a song of praise to God, but it's deeper than that. She sings a song of joy because of how good God is, but she also sings a song of justice for what God will do through her, in her life, and for the world - because of Jesus.

Even as Mary sings, I don't imagine that her life was peaceful at all. I imagine it was incredibly chaotic – and even scary - what I'd consider the opposite of peaceful. And yet, she has a sense of peace that passes understanding because she trusts deeply in God. Young Sally Brown trusts in the stuff she can get as a way to find peace, but

young Mary finds peace in offering herself to God - to be a channel of God's salvation for the world.

And Mary's part in God's story should give us a sense that God works in ways we do not understand or even appreciate. God chooses to come to and call the most vulnerable - a young girl with no power of her own. God chooses to come as a child - the most vulnerable and powerless. And that sets the stage for God who will work - not by wielding power and might - but by showing humility and love that transforms the world.

So today we're challenged to reject earthly power and its draw - and to seek humility. And we can learn from Mary. Peace came because she trusted in God and committed her life to God. We struggle every day to commit ourselves to God - fully. Maybe we offer God a part of our lives, but to give it all over is a challenge, especially because many of us want control. We want to know what's coming. We want to know what to expect. We want to plan ahead.

When the promise of the Messiah came after hundreds of years of waiting, when Mary and Joseph were called to be a part of God's plan for salvation in Jesus, the angel used the phrase "do not be afraid." The peace Jesus offers is connected to who he is. He is Messiah, and he will suffer for the sake of the world. And those who follow him will know suffering and persecution, too. That's not always what we want to hear, but we know that for Mary and Joseph, the call to bring Jesus into the world wasn't easy.

We shouldn't be surprised about it. We shouldn't have unrealistic expectations about what it means to follow Jesus. The peace he offers is not a free ride without conflict or difficulty. But there is a promise. Jesus offers peace right now, not as a far-off promise to come eventually, but right now in our midst. It is peace that works powerfully when we pray and when we seek justice in the world.

And peace drives out fear. Peace comes because we have a relationship with God through Christ. Peace does not simply come from inside of us, but because of God's love at work in us. John Ortberg says, "Never worry alone. When anxiety grabs my mind, it is self-perpetuating. Worrying thoughts reproduce faster than rabbits, so one of the most powerful ways to stop the spiral of worry is simply to disclose my worry to a friend... The simple act of reassurance from another human being [becomes] a tool of the Spirit to cast out fear -- because peace and fear are both contagious."

Many people are seeking peace. Some people want "inner peace." We seek guidance and direction or some sense of purpose like Charlie Brown. We try to find it by taking spiritual expeditions or in the next exercise craze or the next drug that will bring relief or comfort. We think that we'll find peace in the world, and yet Jesus is clear that we find peace with him.

Peace comes in knowing that we don't do all of this on our own. We make a commitment to Jesus. We love Jesus. We trust Jesus. We put our faith in Jesus. And we recognize our need for Jesus. We repent of our sin, ask for forgiveness, and seek to follow him. We seek to live in peace with one another. And we have peace when we face the reality of death, grief, illness, brokenness, pain, despair.

The peace that Jesus offers transforms our lives into a powerful witness to the glory of God. That's who Mary is. We have Sally whose seeking peace through the stuff she wants. We have Mary who is relying on the peace that only God can give. Mary knows the peace of God because she believes that God knows her. She's heard about God's goodness all of her life, and in the midst of this call from God, she confirms God's goodness and God's claim on her as beloved.

And I hope we hear that today. God knows you. For as much as we seek relationships that give our lives meaning, we can't neglect our relationship with our Creator who truly knows us and accepts us. Our prayer life - sharing with God - is vital. Our worship life - praising God - is important. Our life with others in God's community - learning about God - is formative. Being generous with what we have - giving to God - is transformative. Trusting God even when we can't see all that's ahead is a part of living faithfully.

Mary also sings that God will do great things, even through her! She claims the call on her life - not in a self-righteous way - but in a God-glorifying way! How can our witness of God's greatness show through us and be told through us?

And Mary is clear that God will lift her up. It's not that God will make her "better than anyone else," but Mary calls us to be humble - to understand who we are and who God is - to come to God in prayer and worship with an open heart. A humble spirit also calls us to remember that we're all in this together - and that Jesus is in it with us.

For me, that's the message Mary received and understood - and what she sings, too. Peace comes from knowing that whatever happens, we can rest in God. Nothing external can shake it. It doesn't mean we won't struggle. It doesn't mean we won't question. It doesn't mean we won't have doubts. It doesn't mean we won't have seasons when we feel far away from God. But peace is knowing that God is not far from us.

Elisabeth Eloit says, "Restlessness and impatience change nothing except our peace and joy. Peace does not dwell in outward things, but in the heart prepared to wait trustfully and quietly on Him who has all things safely in His hands." It's a nice thought, but you need to know that it comes from a deep place. Eliot worked for many years as a missionary in very dangerous places in Ecuador. That kind of peace is cultivated as we put our lives in God's hands.

Peace comes when we trust God. Not just in a few things, but in all things. And it's something we share with one another as we witness to God's faithfulness. Peace is something we offer to others in the name of Jesus Christ. Peace is something we live as we speak of God who loves us, saves us, and transforms us – and as we speak of God's desire for all people to be made whole and to experience new life in Christ.

Today Mary's song is the message. Hear her song. And may the peace of Christ rule in our hearts.

Let us pray...

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE