

Dec 12 2010 Advent 3 Lk. 1:1-25; 26-45

A HOLY STIRRING ON THE EARTH

Silence! We don't like silence. Sometimes we are asked to stand for a moment of silence and that moment of silence seems so long. If I asked you to remain quiet for 45 seconds, and asked you to stand when you thought that time was up, without looking at your watch, or counting the seconds, I wonder how many would stand up early, and how many would stand after the first person stood thinking they must know. Silence! At times we like it. It gives us time to think, to regroup, to remember, to reflect, and just to take time to be silent. No TV, (my Carole would love that one.) No radio. No talking. No reading. Just silence. Dead silence.

Last week I told you how God spoke to Elijah when he was waiting in the cave, not by the earthquake, nor the wind, nor the fire, but in the silence. And last week our message of hope and waiting came from the prophet Malachi reminding the people of God's promise that the Messiah would come one day. He told them this, "... *I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers.*" The prophecy ends....and then for all intensive purposes, there was silence. From that moment and for 400 or so years, there was not much news from God. His voice was silent. We might say the angels were silent. Oh, once in awhile God spoke. After all he never gave up on his people. And he did promise them that he would always be their God, and they would be his people. But, well, no major stories come out of this silence, except some that have been recorded in history through the books between the Old and New Testament that record things that happened, but nothing new from God. HE was waiting...prepared and waiting for the right time. Between the last book of the Old Testament, Malachi, there was silence until we read some 400 years later the gospel of Matthew that begins with the genealogy

of Jesus. So for 400 years the people continued to wait for the promise of God to send the righteous one. They watched, hoped, looked for someone that would fit the description of what the Messiah would look like, but no one fit the bill. So they waited and hoped and prayed it would be soon.

As I was thinking about those 400 silent years I thought about the 400 years that were silent when the people of God went to Egypt when Joseph was there. For 400 years they were away from the land God gave them. For 400 years it was as if they just went unnoticed, without much fanfare, not much word from God, no messages, no prophets, just God's people growing in size, being blessed over and over again. While the rest of Egypt struggled during the hard times, God's chosen people thrived from around 50 people to thousands. But one day a Pharaoh who did not know Joseph comes to power, enslaves God's people which causes a great stirring in their hearts. Many of the chosen were dying from the beatings, the over working and much more. Then one day God heard the prayers of his people. He heard them cry out to be free. And after 400 years of slavery God sent them Moses to deliver them from bondage. And so, after 400 years, God's voice booms loud and clear as God spoke through Moses, the deliverer to Pharaoh "Let my people go!"

After 400 years, the people gathered up the bones of Joseph, packed their bags, loaded their carts and followed Moses to the Promised Land. After 400 years, God's people were free... free from bondage...free from slavery... free from oppression. But the journey and the wait were difficult. And those who grumbled and rebelled never did make it to the Promised Land as those people wandered in the wilderness for 40 years.

This morning we hear about another 400 silent years and the people still wait...still are oppressed...still in bondage...still hanging in there. But still not much word from God.

And then one day there was a stirring. God gathered his angels in heaven, told them his plan and told them it was time to execute it. The angels got their wings touched up at the local wings garage, new feathers and all that, retrieved their halos, gold and silver from the halo department brightly polished, attended the commissioning ceremony and after hearing God's inspiring message of what they were to do, and what was to come, chief angel Gabriel gave the final command, "Angels, start those wings flapping. Trumpeters, sound the charge message. Angels it's time to make your rounds to those God sends you. Sing, shout, speak that soon God's Son will be born, the King of kings, Lord of lords, and Savior of the world. And he shall reign forever and ever." And with that, the angels went on their rounds. Oh the angels were making their rounds, O what beautiful sounds as they headed from heaven toward the earth. Yes what a beautiful sound. There was much joy in the heavenly realm as those angels made their way toward earth singing and rejoicing with the Good News in their hearts.

Meanwhile, a man named Zechariah, a priest whose job it was to serve in the Temple was about his priestly business. It was a quiet night like most nights. He was alone as usual so there was much silence, much time to think, to pray, to thank God for his family, his friends, his call to serve God in this ministry. One thing was missing. His wife Elizabeth was unhappy. And as many of you know, if mamma ain't happy no one's happy. She had not been able to give him a son. In fact they were childless. For some reason God had not blessed them with children and this made Elizabeth feel unfulfilled. They tried and tried, prayed and prayed until the day that they realized it was not going to happen for her years of child bearing had ceased. In this area of their lives God seemed to be, shall we say silent?

And so on this night in the Temple as the angels were stirring and Zechariah was doing his duty, and praying to God, out of nowhere a bright light, and then a voice that

scared him. *“Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son and you are to give him the name John. He will be a joy and delight to you and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.... he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”*

A shocked Zechariah, perhaps on his knees at this moment, with his mouth wide open, questions what is before him. Is this just some mirage? Is it really an angel? “Fear not!” the angel said again. “But angel, my wife, you know, she is beyond having a child. You must be mistaken me for a younger man.” “No, Zechariah. My message came straight from God himself. You and Elizabeth have found favor in the eyes of God and you will have a son named John who will lead the way for the coming of the Messiah whose birth will follow Johns. God has heard your cries, and the people’s cries, and the messages are going out and there is a holy stirring going on in this place and in other places that the promise of the Messiah is about to be fulfilled. And to show you the truth in all of this, you will be struck speechless until John is born. Till that time, may God bless you and the womb of your wife Elizabeth? Raise him well. Teach him the ways of God, and prepare him to be prepared to hear God’s voice in his ministry to prepare God’s people for the coming of the Lord. One word I will leave you with. TRUST!”

Now I know that isn’t what happened, but it could have. Can you imagine the look of horror and unbelief that was on Elizabeth’s face when told she would be having a baby at her age?? “A bbbbbbaby? Us? Me? We? You must be joking” she may have said to Zechariah. Though he could not speak, perhaps in the dirt he wrote one word...TRUST!

There was a holy stirring and we know according to Luke's accurate account that the angel came to Zechariah and then to Elizabeth and in her old age she had her son, and when she was asked what name to give this boy Zechariah spoke for the first time since his time in the Temple. "He shall be called John."

And the angels were making their rounds with the Good News to all they went. Gabriel himself had a message for a young lady who was already engaged to a fine carpenter. This young lady may have been preparing for her wedding arraigned by her family, to a carpenter. When the angel appeared he told Mary that God had found favor with her and out of all the other women in this world she had been selected to be the mother of God's only begotten Son. A doubting Mary listened, had questions, pondered the angels every word. She was not to fear because God would work all the details out. *"Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."*

After much, much thought, questioning, prayer, Mary surrenders to God's call. *"I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said. I am counting on your promises that you will work it out with Joseph as well, for I know in my heart, that nothing is impossible with God."* Perhaps the angels who visited Mary and Joseph left them also with one word, "TRUST!"

And so it came to be that a messenger also spoke to Joseph and humbly he too surrendered to the call of God not to fear for he had been chosen by God to a very difficult task of being the earthly father for God's son.

And the angels were making their rounds.

What a wonderful thought. The music today was moving and catchy. But what is most important is the message. What is the message?

First of all the message is one of **hope**. Imagine after those 400 years of silence a word from God. The message is that God had heard their prayers and was in the process of sending the long awaited Messiah. He was coming to a world full of hate and struggles. He was coming to a world that really wasn't prepared for his coming, nor seeking his coming. He was coming to a world that was oppressed and struggling. He was coming to bring the light into the world of darkness. He was coming to bring peace on earth. He was coming to bring salvation. He was coming to bring life to those who would believe.

The message is the same for us today. Hope is so important. If you don't think so ask people with cancer. Ask someone who doesn't have a job. Ask someone who has lost a loved one. Even today, some 8 years after a Relay for Life walk in Eureka I still wear a bracelet that says "Hope." Even though I have had good news the last few times of my scoping I hope in March it will be clear again. I hope the cancer is gone for good. Hope! The family of Daniele Loftus hasn't given up hope, nor other family dealing with critical illnesses in their family. We hope for a miracle, and folks, that's what Christmas is about. It's about a miracle that happened to a girl who never had sex and became pregnant and gave birth to God's son. Now that's a miracle!

Every Christmas we remember the birth of God's Son that still brings us hope in our lives. It is a blessed hope knowing in our hearts that the God of yesterday is the God of today and the God of our tomorrows. His promises are still true. And the message is still the same, 'nothing is impossible with God.' The angels are making their rounds even today telling each of us that even when things look bleak in our lives never to give up, for Jesus still reigns. "He lives! He lives! Christ Jesus lives today."

The next message is that we are **not to fear**. The wandering angels began each conversation to Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph with these words, “Don’t be afraid.” Hey, how many times have we heard that phrase from Jesus’ lips? He said it to the disciples when he came to them walking on the water. He said it to them when he appeared to them in the Upper Room after his resurrection. He said it to them during a storm. “Fear No!” his voice booms. Well, we know his voice still booms for us today as well, whispering in our ears when trouble hits that we should not be afraid, but trust. Don’t be afraid...fear not. “Fear not little ones, for I am with you always through the good and the bad...through the joys and the tough times...through the good health and the illnesses... through the sorrows and the joys. Fear not for I am your God.” There is a little chorus from Bill Gaither that goes, “Through it all, through it all, I learned to trust in Jesus, I learned to trust in God.”

That’s the final message this morning. **Trust!** That’s the opposite of fear. Fear is worrying. Trust is believing. Trust brings new life and dreams. Fear creates chaos in one’s life. Trust brings peace.

When the angels were making their rounds we remember how they came to the shepherds in the fields to tell them not to fear because a baby had been born in a manger not many miles from where they were standing. Look and see the bright star that would lead them to his birth place. Don’t be afraid to go and check it out for the Messiah had been born. God had given them, the lowly shepherds, the chance to be the first to see the new born King, Savior of the world so that on their journey they could tell the story to all, that God sent his Son into this world to offer them peace and salvation. And all who would trust in him would have life eternal.

The message is the same today. The angels still are making their rounds all around this world. The angels are making their rounds, what a beautiful sound... “Hey world, fear

not, the Lord is with you. Fear not congregation of the Williamsville United Methodist Church, God has a vision for this church in the days ahead. Fear not people for God's message is the same...he is with you always and he will reign on high forever and ever. Fear not, just trusts in him, for he is here. Trust! Trust! Trust!"

While working on this sermon I remembered a country western song by Alabama and it fits for today. Listen as I read the words.

I was walking home from school on a cold winter's day
Took a shortcut through the woods and I lost my way
It was getting late and I was scared and alone
Then a kind old man took my hand and led me home
Mama couldn't see him, but he was standing there
But I knew in my heart, he was the answer to my prayers

Oh I believe there are angels among us
Sent down to us from somewhere up above
They come to you and me in our darkest hours
To show us how to live
To teach us how to give
To guide us with a light of love

When life dealt troubled times and had me down on my knees
There's always been someone there to come along and comfort me
A kind word from a stranger to lend a helping hand
A phone call from a friend just to say I understand
Ain't it kind of funny at the dark end of the road
Someone lights the way with just a single ray of hope

Oh I believe there are angels among us
Sent down to us from somewhere up above
They come to you and me in our darkest hours

To show us how to live
To teach us how to give
To guide us with a light of love

They wear so many faces
Show up in the strangest places
Grace us with their mercy
In our time of need

Oh I believe there are angels among us
Sent down to us from somewhere up above
They come to you and me in our darkest hours
To show us how to live
To teach us how to give
To guide us with a light of love

Yes, the angels are making their rounds. O, what a beautiful sound!