

Sermon December 5 2021 JaQuan Beachem 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent

SCRIPTURE:

*(Translations of both texts are from The Rev. Dr. Wilda Gafney's "A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church, Year W.")*

1 Samuel 2:1-10, Canticle of Hannah:

Hannah prayed and she said, "My heart exults in the HOLY ONE OF OLD; my horn is lifted up in my God. My mouth (opens) wide against my enemies, for I will rejoice in my victory. "There is none holy like the MOST HIGH, none besides you; there is no rock like our God. Speak proudly no more, multiplying pride, nor let arrogance come from your mouth; for the AGELESS GOD is a God of knowledge, and by God deeds are accounted. The bows of the mighty are broken, yet the feeble gird on warrior-strength. Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, yet those who were hungry are fat. She who was barren has birthed seven children, yet she who has many children languishes. The CREATOR OF ALL kills and gives life; brings down to Sheol and raises up. The GRACIOUS ONE makes poor and makes rich; brings low and also lifts up. God raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from heaps of human waste, to seat them with nobles and inherit a seat of honor. For to the CREATOR belong the pillars of the earth, and on them God has set the world. God will guard the feet of the faithful who belong to God, while the wicked perish in shadow; for it is not by might that one prevails. The HOLY ONE OF SINAI! Those who strive against God shall be shattered; God thunders against them from heaven. The FOUNT OF JUSTICE will judge the ends of the earth; God will give strength to God's ruler, and exalt the power of the anointed of God."

Luke 1:39-45, Mary Meets Elizabeth:

Mary set out in those days and went to the hill country with haste, to a Judean town. There she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. Now when Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. From where does this [visit] come to me? That the mother of my Sovereign comes to me? Look! As soon as I heard the sound of your greeting in my ear, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Now blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of those things spoken to her by the Holy One.

SERMON: “Finding Peace (in Peril)” The Rev. JaQuan Beachem

Here we are -- moving into the second week of Advent! The theme is peace. That said, we are not living in a time where peace is a given. Some among us have been paralyzed by this pandemic moment. Paralyzed by variants and vitriol. Where, I ask, is the peace? Some of us are plagued by the uncertainty that abounds in this season. Some are disheartened by the lack of support being given in this moment by those we have placed our trust in. How in this moment do we produce peace?

Some are having a hard time discerning which way is up in this holiday season. Many are seeking community; however, they are not quite sure how to engage in it at a distance or given the vulnerability of their situation. Where is the peace?

Will you pray with me? God of grace, meet us here and now. May the stories of Hannah, Elizabeth and Mary give us guidance. Allow the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, our refuge and greatest support. Amen.

Friends, I would like to speak to you this morning from a message titled “*Finding Peace... In Peril.*” Finding peace in peril.

My discernment process for my ordination, which was concluded a couple weeks ago on the 21<sup>st</sup> of November, has been occurring during a time known in some clergy circles as the Great Resignation. Adjusting to new normals, responding to changing safety guidelines, and learning new technologies on how to gather for worship safely have left some faith leaders exhausted. This is not unique to clergy, I’m finding. The demands of the pandemic along with desires of perfectionism have left some clergy, some educators, some parents depleted, left many at a crossroads... to resign or not to resign, to retire or not to retire. Asking the question, where is the peace? With seemingly never-ending to-do lists and tasks, where is the peace? For good reason, the twists and turns of leading and nurturing in this moment have left many thirsty for a respite. Finding peace in times of peril...

I will be honest. When preparing for this sermon this week, I went back and forth a bit myself with what direction to go with this sermon ... to go the “no justice, no peace” route or to share strategies on how to build or cultivate peace from within ourselves. I found that it is a both/and. For anyone who has talked to a divinity school student, I imagine you have heard that phrase “both/and” this, “both/and” that. Here, as we look to peace, we hold peril and peace together.

And taking a look at the narratives of Hannah, Mary and Elizabeth, I found some pointers. We meet Hannah here on her knees, crying out to God – crying out holy tears. We find Hannah praying for a change. As believers, we know that prayer has power, and prayer can change things. That said, I would not say that Hannah’s prayer here is an ordinary one. Hannah’s posture of prayer is one of boldness and courage. The passage says that she opened her mouth boldly. We must speak truth to power boldly and fervently, friends.

Hannah’s prayer is ardent. Her song is passionate, her posture zealous. Hannah is overtaken in this moment by emotion. Emotion where even the chief priest Eli mistakes her for drunk. Hannah is laying all bare here. Hannah is giving her burdens over to God, giving her heart’s yearning over to the Most High.

Pouring our hearts out to the Creator who wants to know us deeply, I will note that feeling our emotions truly is not necessarily acceptable in our society. And in this moment, even the chief priest found himself in shock, not quite knowing what to do with this eruption of emotion from Hannah.

Community, even though we are not groomed to truly feel our emotions, though we are conditioned to place our heads above our hearts intellectually. We ought to try to move tenderly, to acknowledge our vulnerabilities. Through ardent prayer, through song, Hannah seeks to cultivate some peace in a time of peril.

In preparation for this morning also, I connected with a friend of this congregation, Rev. Adele Crawford. You may know that Adele is an opera singer. And when two performers get to chatting even about Scripture, we cannot help but to bring it back into the body. You can't make this stuff up. Later that same afternoon, I was given tickets by a dear one among us, Cathy, to see an opera, to see *Eurydice* at the Mahaiwe Theater. And here I was able to witness with my own eyes the bodily experience that is in sharing emotion. Speaking or singing or praying boldly comes from within, from the diaphragm, from the gut. It reminded me that we ought to maybe lead with our guts a bit more.

Now, the story of *Eurydice* is one of tragic loss and deep love. Many of us are much closer to loss than we have been before this time. And I would say to be able to begin to hold this heaviness and to heal, we must engage our entire body. We must engage, like the opera singers, for our entire body to be a vehicle of power, to share in song and peace.

Peace, again, comes from within. Peace is bodily. Peace is somatic! An embodied experience! Once cultivated, it is to be shared. There is beauty in the sharing, beloved, no matter how raw and messy. It can be easy, though, to dismiss our emotions and toss them aside, deeming them inappropriate or gross. It can be easy to dismiss difference... to dismiss different bodies and/or presentations of bodies. It can be easy to place judgment on non-traditional portrayals.

And that brings us to Mary. Mary, the one who comes with child, seemingly out of the blue, without a husband. In her time, given her state and status, it may have been deemed rational to stone her, or to dismiss her to the fringes at the very least. It could be said that Mary was bringing a child into the world at a time of great peril.

Enter Elizabeth, Mary's cousin. One who knew being at the fringes herself. One who for a majority of her life had been without child. Elizabeth, though, is one of status. She is educated, and righteous. We know this because her language in parts matches the language that Jesus uses in the Beatitudes. And it is here, with her righteous stature, educated, that she greets Mary. Now on paper, Elizabeth may have had every right to shun Mary. But instead, she greets her with warmth and hospitality, because she knows better.

The passage says that Elizabeth's baby leaped with joy at the greeting! At this moment, Elizabeth knew! Elizabeth proclaims boldly the blessedness of Mary, the blessing of her body, and what was happening inside of it.

In our tellings of this story in the Advent season, we typically rush to Mary, and don't spend much time with Elizabeth. But I would say that in Elizabeth's bold proclamation: *blessed are you*, that grants Mary some peace in a very chaotic and scary time in her life. In a time where Mary may not have known which way was up.

Elizabeth, overwhelmed by Spirit, is able to sit in solidarity with Mary. Elizabeth is able to speak life into Mary and into the life of her child. Elizabeth speaks truth to power boldly, in a fashion different from Hannah, opposing societal norms. Elizabeth knew that we rise when we lift others.

Finding peace and cultivating it is counter cultural, beloved, I'm sorry to say. That said, I would say that it is all the more reason for us to practice it.

Looking to Hannah, Mary, and Elizabeth, we see that God shows up in the most unlikely spaces, when we might be in our deepest states of peril. Peace can seem absurd in a world that privileges intellectualizing over somatic processing, that prioritizes productivity over biological happenings. Contrary to the hybrid Zoom realities that we are still engaging in, we are not simply floating heads.

Friends, we must expand our capacities for emotions, to hold what we feel and yearn for. We must expand our capacity to acknowledge what is also out of our control. When we quiet our hearts, we miss an opportunity to encounter the holy. We quiet the quickening of the Spirit. When we do this, we miss God in action. We miss where our Peace comes from! Friends, again, we must remember our bodies.

Let us take a moment now together. I invite you to close your eyes if you feel comfortable, and to take a deep breath in, and let it go. And another deep breath in, and out. What are you feeling in this moment? What is crossing your mind? Take one more breath in, and out. As you open your eyes, I remind you to prioritize your breath, prioritize it while you still have it in your lungs. It is this work that grounds us. It is this work that connects us to one another, and to the One who is closer to us than our breath.

We must investigate where we hold our tensions, notice where we hold our stresses. We must remember our bodies. This way we can identify and acknowledge our grief, tend to our wounds and find some space for healing. It is this work that allows us to quiet our racing minds even for a moment, to find some peace in challenging times. For it is in this peace work that we may find renegotiation in a time of resignation.

Remember where your peace comes from. Find stillness. Be still, and know who God is. It is in this work that we are able to find peace in perilous times, to encounter God and muster the energy to press on -- for ourselves and one another.

Remember that you are an instrument of God. Remember your practices of peace. Of song and prayer. Of meditation and yoga. Of baking and jogging. The morning cup of tea or joe. Maybe even a stroll along the Housatonic River. Or catching a film or a piece of theater. Or even outdoors in the beautiful spiral of lights that we have outside of our Sanctuary this Advent season.

Remember that peace is also bold, as well as a bodily thing. Something that comes from within, something that starts at home. With God it can also radiate outward, like the candles that we lit today on our Advent wreath.

In closing, I remind you that Elizabeth grants us a model of how to advocate, to encourage and see one another as blessed. Hagar provided us with language for the God Who Sees. And Hannah gives action for a God Who Hears. A God who hears us at our most vulnerable, a God who knows us better than we know ourselves. And yet, still sees us as holy, and calls us beloved.

It is in this peace-making work that we are able to rest truly in God's promise. We must focus, beloved, on our peace, in order to find it.

May it be so. Amen.

*Our guest pastor: An advocate & artist born and groomed in the suburbs of Atlanta, JaQuan Beachem is a 2021 Master of Divinity graduate of Yale Divinity School. Rev. Beachem, who was ordained on November 21, is serving as the Director of Community Development & Spiritual Formation at Andover Newton Seminary at Yale. In their leisure, JaQuan enjoys jamming out to music, honing his yoga practice, tasting a new recipe, and noticing things bloom! Rev. Beachem will lead worship services through Advent.*