

December 4-8, 2023 Edition

Following The Year^(s) Of[^] Jesus Part 101

Experiencing The Nativity:
The Peace Of Mary

By: Ed &/or Judy Gardner

December 2/3, 2023



When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well you knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday Reflection: We are in this series right now looking at how Jesus changed our world in ways that we often don't even think about. This week we're going to look at an aspect of the human condition that He wants to change- in fact would LOVE to change- but we just won't often get with the program. And that leads to the theme for this week- peace. What is peace? We generally think of it as a feeling of calm and serenity. Here is the official definition from dictionary.com:

Peace: freedom of the mind from annoyance, distraction, anxiety, an obsession, etc.; tranquillity; serenity.

Jesus was called the "Prince of Peace". He talked about peace often. Even before He was born this was said about Him:

God's Sunrise will break in upon us, Shining on those in the darkness, those sitting in the shadow of death, Then showing us the way, one foot at a time, down the path of peace. Luke 1:78-79 (NCV)

Isn't that beautiful? Doesn't it sound like a life free from any annoyance, distraction, anxiety or obsession? Only if we don't understand the kind of peace Jesus is offering. He's not offering a life of peace based on the definition that we generally work with but a life filled with the peace that the Bible talks about. So what does that kind of "peace" look like? Well, in order to really get to the bottom of that it might help to look at what the antonym of the Biblical word for "peace" is. It turns out the opposite of the Biblical word for peace isn't turmoil or fighting or disharmony- it was "in pieces". The opposite of Biblical word for peace meant broken or shattered which means the Biblical word for peace means "whole" or "integrated". The idea being that the kind of peace Jesus offers promises His people the ability to remain whole while living in a broken, shattered world. It's more about a kind of strength for living our lives in a world filled with turmoil and storms than it is an invitation to a feeling.

So how do we receive this peace? Well, not by having someone telling you to feel peace when your world is falling apart around you. One time I was driving in my 1990 Honda Civic when a truck turned left right in front of me and I had no time to stop so I crashed right into him. I'll never forget what happened next- a tape I had ejected but left sticking out of my cassette tape deck was injected (I guess maybe that's a good way to describe how cassettes were inserted into car stereos?) due to the force of the crash. Well, I had been listening to Bing Crosby (yes... Bing Crosby. I like Bing Crosby, ok? I also like AC/DC and one of their cassette could just as easily have been in the tape deck at that moment [or the sound track from the Music Man or Kenny Rogers or Barry Manilow or Van Halen or Journey... what can I say? I have an eclectic taste in music]). Anyways, Bing pops in and it just so happens that I had ejected the tape during the song, Too-Ra-Loo-Ra-Loo-Ral. That song goes like this:

Too-ra-loo-ra-loo-ral ~ Too-ra-loo-ra-li~ Too-ra-loo-ra-loo-ral~Hush now, don't you cry.

And it had been ejected at the point where as soon as it was injected back into the cassette deck the first thing I heard was "hush, now don't you cry." That seems fairly amusing... now. It didn't then. I wasn't seeing the humor in that coincidence (and actually I don't

think it was a coincidence- to me “coincidence” is when God chooses to remain anonymous and I’ve found He’s got a sense of humor that I don’t always find funny at the time). So how do you think I felt at that moment? Sitting with the hood of my car half way under the bed of a Ford F-150? Do you think I was taking Bing’s advice? Do you think I was feeling the “peace” at that moment? Nope. Not a bit. And I didn’t think it was humorous or even the slightest bit interesting that Bing had been ejected at the perfect moment to set up that whole scenario. It doesn’t work for someone to just tell you to be peaceful.

So how do we find the “pathway of peace” that the Bible tells us Jesus came to show us? That’s what we’re going to focus on this week. Because Jesus came to this world partly to teach us how to walk on that path:

I am leaving you with a gift- peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don’t be troubled or afraid. John 14:26 (NLT)

But I don’t know about you- that’s one I’ve noticed that I struggle with more than I’d like to admit (especially over the last few months) even though Jesus came to leave us with that kind of peace. So in order to learn how to find that path and then walk that path we’re going to watch how Jesus’ mom- Mary- walked that path as she lived through some of the most un-peaceful days, months and years that any human has ever been asked to live through. What does the pathway of peace look like? We’re going to see it’s nothing like the world thinks it would be.

Tuesday Reflection: This week we are talking about peace and we are going to follow Mary’s journey down that path of peace to get an idea of what that might look like for us. So let’s start by looking at her story from the beginning. What do we know about Mary? Actually, not a whole lot. We know she’s betrothed to a man named Joseph. In those days girls usually got betrothed/married at about the age of 13-16 years old (with anyone getting up to 16 starting to worry about whether they ever would get married) so she was probably around 14. Let that sink in for a minute. 14 years old. Can you even imagine:

In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. Gabriel appeared to her and said, “Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you! Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean. Luke 1:26-29 (NLT)

And so we see the first step on Mary’s pathway of “peace”- she was confused. Which must have been jarring since she probably felt like things were progressing exactly as they should BEFORE the angel showed up. But the angel shows up and BOOM! Suddenly she’s very confused. Why? Because none of this is normal or ordinary. When I was little I figured that back in Biblical days angels were popping up all over the place and all the time. An angel would show up and people would just take it in stride- “oh, hey Gabriel... how’s it going today?” But that’s not the way it was which is why most of the time when an angel showed up the first words out of his mouth would be, “don’t be afraid.”

So yeah- Mary's confused. She's not sure why she is favored and that the Lord is with her. She's about to find out:

"Don't be afraid, Mary," the angel told her, "for you have found favor with God! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. Luke 1:30-31 (NLT)

So now she's got some more information which changes her mood a bit. Now she's not just confused- now she's afraid. Yes, even though the angel told her not to be. She's got to be terrified at this point. Why? Because she may only be 14 years old (give or take) but she knows what happens to girls in first century Israel (although to be fair it's not really the first century at this point... is it? My mistake ;o) who get pregnant BEFORE they get married. First off their engagement is broken. Secondly they will never find a respectable man to marry them in the future. And finally, the young girl found to be pregnant before she's married will be taken to the center of town and stripped of all her clothing and tied to tree for a day. Yeah- I'm guessing Mary was terrified at this point.

Now real quick, a word about the virgin birth of Jesus. This is one of those things that trips up an awful lot of people. I have a friend who has no problem believing in a creator of the universe but just can't buy the virgin birth. I'm no scientist but it just seems to me that if one believes in an Almighty Creator Who spoke everything into existence and Who made up the biological processes by which human birth takes place then the virgin birth really isn't that big of a trick (you know, compared to creation of everything out of nothing just by speaking it into existence). But maybe that's just me.

I've also heard quite a few people who don't believe the virgin birth say things like, "people were just more ignorant then. It was pre-scientific and everyone was very superstitious and it was easy for them to believe something like the virgin birth back then but we know better now." I think that's so condescending against ancient people. I mean, smart people have known for a really long time how babies are made. And the virgin birth was just as ridiculous to people in the first century as it is to us today. Nobody was just going to blindly buy the virgin birth story as "gospel" without a lot of convincing.

Now we know why Mary was scared. And this is the path of "peace"?!?!? Exactly. More about that tomorrow but maybe for today think about what a life of peace that still has more than its share of turmoil and conflict is possible.

Wednesday Reflection: So yesterday we saw that Mary's pathway of peace started with her feeling like she was on pretty solid footing and then immediately plunged her first into confusion and then into being scared. What's next on this pathway of peace for Mary? I'm glad you asked because Mary was wondering the same thing:

Mary asked the angel, "But how can this happen? I am a virgin." The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you... For nothing is impossible with God." Luke 1:34-37 (NLT)

What comes next on Mary's journey? Well if it started with confusion and then fear I guess I'd say what comes next for her is fear mixed with confusion. Both wrapped up together (almost like the first Christmas present when you think about it but not really). Not only is Mary confused that an angel is in her bedroom (if that's where it happened-

the Bible doesn't say for sure where it happened) and not only is she scared because she's just been told that she's going to get pregnant BEFORE she's even married but then the angel answers her most obvious question- HOW IS THIS POSSIBLE?!?!? (the upper caps are all mine- the Bible doesn't say that's how she responded but I don't think I'm going out on a limb to guess her response deserves all upper caps from us).

So now we see that Mary is scared AND confused at the same time. She doesn't understand how this could possibly happen and the answer from the angel probably doesn't do much to calm her fears and clear up her confusion. I mean, I'm not a girl and so I never really gave it much thought but I can imagine getting a little freaked out being told that the "Holy Spirit would come upon" me and the "power of the Most High" would overshadow me. WHAT DOES THAT EVEN MEAN? I mean, forget about the consequences of becoming pregnant before my marriage- what exactly does that last bit mean?

Now before your mind starts to scramble someplace that I don't think it needs to scramble to I want to talk about what Mary would have understood (or at least been reminded of) by the Angel's words. In the book of Exodus we read about something called The Ark Of The Covenant. If you like Indiana Jones you have at least a little bit of understanding of what the Ark of the Covenant was- it was a box (that's all an "ark" is- a container. It's a different word in Hebrew than Noah's "ark". Noah's ark was a word that stood for a container that saved someone [or someones] and is only used one other time in the Old Testament to refer to a tiny cradle in which a baby named Moses was placed and sent down the Nile river hoping he would be saved from Pharaoh's death squads. That part has little to do with our study of Mary and Jesus but it's interesting and there's something in the corner of my mind trying to make a connection between Moses' "ark" and Jesus' "manger"- maybe it'll come to me before I preach on it this weekend?) that contained several objects including the 10 Commandments. When the Ark Of The Covenant and the Tabernacle of God were completed we read about what happened next:

Then the cloud covered the Tabernacle, and the glory of the Lord filled the Tabernacle. Moses could no longer enter the Tabernacle because the cloud had settled down over it, and the glory of the Lord filled the Tabernacle. Exodus 40:34-35 (NLT)

What occurred at the Tabernacle when the Ark Of The Covenant was finally placed within it? The cloud "covered" the Tabernacle and the glory of the Lord "filled" the Tabernacle and the cloud (the glory cloud that represented the very presence of God) "settled down over it". Now let's look at what the angel told Mary again:

Mary asked the angel, "But how can this happen? I am a virgin." The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you... For nothing is impossible with God." Luke 1:34-37 (NLT)

As soon as the angel tells Mary what's going to happen I guarantee you she immediately thought of the Tabernacle and the Ark Of The Covenant. I know the verbs are off a bit ("covered" and "filled" in Exodus versus "come upon" and "overshadow" in Luke) but remember- the Old Testament was written in Hebrew and the New Testament was written in Greek. Not that the angel wouldn't have spoken Greek to Mary- he would have spoken

Aramaic which is very closely related to Hebrew. Most scholars believe the verbs from the two passages were interchangeable.

Mary asks what the process will be for her becoming pregnant and is told basically that God will inhabit her in the same way He inhabited the Ark Of The Covenant. And that's what ended up happening, isn't it (sorry if that was a spoiler for you and you weren't sure how this story ends ;o) ? The Glory of God moves into Mary's womb. That's what Mary is told in response to her question. So how do you think she feels at this point. Just because the language of the angel reminds her of the language of the Tabernacle and the Ark Of The Covenant doesn't mean she suddenly understands everything. I imagine she's gone from confusion to fear and back to confusion laced with fear pretty quickly.

Tomorrow we'll talk about her response but for today maybe spend some time thinking about what this must have been like for this 14 year old girl from a tiny little backwater town called Nazareth. Has God ever asked you to do something that you didn't understand the process or maybe even the reason?

Thursday Reflection: Ok so let's reset. Mary is a young lady betrothed to be married to a man named Joseph. One day during her betrothal period (where she is legally "married" but isn't living with Joseph yet) an angel shows up and tells her God has chosen her to bear His Son. The language the angel uses is reminiscent of the language used to describe when the presence and Glory of God would descend upon the Tabernacle and take up residence in the Ark Of The Covenant.

Just another day walking down the pathway of peace, right (in case you forgot that's what this week's lesson is about- Mary's pathway of "peace")? I can't imagine being able to speak after all of that. I imagine being in a sort of catatonic state because my mind won't slow down enough for it to do anything other than the autonomic functions that it has to keep going to keep me alive. But not Mary. Do you know what she does next? She discovers the pathway of peace- not the definition of peace that most of us share but God's definition of peace- the kind of peace her Son was coming to teach us how to find:

And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her. Luke 1:38 (ESV)

In other words, this 14 (give or take a year or two) year old girl looked at this angel after hearing the news that her life was about to be turned upside down (if she was willing to allow God's plan to take place in her life) and very calmly says, "let it be".

If you're a Beatles fan you've got a pleasant tune running through your mind right now- you're welcome! It's an awesome song. Paul McCartney, who wrote the song, claims it has nothing to do with this story but rather is about his own mom who just happens to be named Mary too. Paul's story is that when he was struggling with the impending breakup of the Beatles and the disintegration of his greatest and longest friendship with John Lennon he had a dream where his mom came to him and whispered words of wisdom- let it be. And somehow through those three words Paul was able to find some measure of peace that got him through the impending storm that would change his life forever.

I think Mary- the young Jewish girl from the Bible- can relate. Those three words are the words that she must have recited to herself over and over in the coming days and weeks and months and years as her quiet life turned into the mother of all storms (sorry, couldn't help myself ;o)

Let it be.

I mean, really, that's what she says and it's pretty much all she says. Just, "let it be" "Whatever You say, Lord. I'm on board. I don't know what will happen or how it will all work out but I trust You so... let it be." How could she do that?

Well, I imagine she actually believed the last line the angel spoke to her. We read it together yesterday but I got all caught up in the verbs the angel used and went down a rabbit trail that lead to the Tabernacle and the Ark Of The Covenant. But really I think what Mary held on to were the last few words of the angel's description:

Mary asked the angel, "But how can this happen? I am a virgin." The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you... For nothing is impossible with God." Luke 1:34-37 (NLT)

Nothing is impossible with God. That's got to be what Mary held on to. Sure she might have been reminded of the language of the Old Testament, the Tabernacle and the Ark Of The Covenant by the words the angel Gabriel spoke to her but even so can you imagine how many unanswered questions that explanation/description of how all of this would take place left? I don't want to get too technical here but I think the theological term is A LOT! And yet she just says, let it be. Why? Because Mary does believe- nothing is impossible for God.

How about you? How about me? Do we REALLY believe that? Because until we do and live our lives accordingly we will never find the peace Jesus came to this earth to bring us. But even if we do believe it, what does Jesus' peace look like? Well, I'll tell you this- it doesn't look like the peaceful, easy feeling the Eagles sang about. It's not the absence of turmoil or even so much a "feeling" as much as it is a pathway that leads to a certain destination. But Mary would learn that just because you're walking the pathway of peace it doesn't mean you won't have turmoil and more questions. More on that tomorrow. Maybe for today spend some time thinking about what it might me for you to say let-it-be to Jesus in your own life.

Friday Reflection: This week we're looking at Mary's journey down the pathway of peace. We've seen how that journey started out with confusion when an angel suddenly appeared to her telling her she was "highly favored". Then we saw the fear she must have felt when told she would become pregnant before her marriage was finalized with her fiancé, Joseph. Then we saw more confusion (probably mixed with a great deal of fear) as she asked (and the angel answered) how all of this could be possible seeing as how she had never been with a man. And finally we watched her find the pathway of peace as she uttered the amazing words, "let it be."

Wouldn't it be nice if once we got to that point we never had to worry again. Wouldn't it be nice if once we got to the let-it-be point in our lives that the fear and confusion and

everything that goes along with it just disappeared and we are left with nothing but peace and certainty? I know I'd appreciate that. But that's not how the pathway of peace works. How does it work? Do you remember all the way back to Monday when I introduced this week's topic? Here's what another guy who got caught up in this whole Christmas miracle story (John The Baptist's dad) put it:

God's Sunrise will break in upon us, Shining on those in the darkness, those sitting in the shadow of death, Then showing us the way, one foot at a time, down the path of peace. Luke 1:78-79 (NCV)

One. Foot. At. A. Time.

That's the pathway of peace. One step at a time. And if you're anything like me then you probably don't like the uncertainty that comes with that pathway. But if you've ever wondered why God doesn't show you more of what's coming in your life or if you have ever been surprised when more turbulence comes along after you choose the pathway of peace you're in good company (no not me- although I have noticed that reality myself many times in my life) because Mary can relate.

I mean think about it. She speaks the wise words, let it be, that put her on the pathway of peace and then she has to start telling people what's going on. "Ummmm, mom and dad. I have something I have to tell you..." "Joseph, we need to talk..." Can you imagine how those conversations must have gone. We know how the conversation with Joseph went because we know he was going to divorce Mary until Gabriel paid him a little visit. I've always wondered why Gabriel didn't tell Joseph BEFORE Mary had to. How is that the pathway-of-peace? And then let's talk about Jesus' birth. When she's almost full term some Roman Emperor issues a decree that means Joseph has to leave town- the only one who probably truly believes her story- and so Mary travels with him (a trip by the way that Jesus would one day make over and over again during His ministry years). When they get to Bethlehem there's no place to stay so they're stuck out in a stable and when Jesus is born He's laid in a manger (an animal food trough) wrapped in rags with only shepherds to come celebrate with the holy family (and shepherds were the absolute bottom of the first century social pecking order- the lowest of the low in most of their culture's eyes). Let's read what that exchange looked like starting with the angels appearing to the shepherds, shall we?

That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified, but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior-yes, the Messiah, the Lord-has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger." Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others-the armies of heaven-praising God and saying, "Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased." When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go to Bethlehem! Let's see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger. After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and

what the angel had said to them about this child. All who heard the shepherds' story were astonished, but Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often. The shepherds went back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. It was just as the angel had told them. Luke 2:8-20 (NLT)

And so Mary goes from confusion, to fear, to fear intermixed with confusion and confusion intermixed with fear to a sort of faithful surrender/acceptance/obedience based off the statement nothing-is-impossible-for-God and then right back into confusion and fear and fear and confusion. What is going on? The pathway of peace. The pathway of peace is not a destination where we never face another storm or where we always have 100% certainty and never wonder/doubt/fear again. It's a place where no matter what we keep taking that next step that's in front of us knowing God's ultimate destination for us will be a place without storms but until then all there can be is trusting Him. The pathway of peace ultimately is holding onto a certain statement like it's a life preserver in a stormy sea:

It's all going to be ok in the end. If it's not ok- it's not the end.

Is it easy to hold onto that sentiment as the storms swirl around us? Nope. But it's all we've got on the pathway of peace. How do we know it's-all-going-to-be-ok? Because nothing-is-impossible-for-God. So what do we do? Let. It. Be.

Tomorrow we'll have a rare Saturday reflection where we finish up this week's study on Mary but for today think about what it means to you that "It's all going to be ok in the end. If it's not ok- it's not the end." Do we believe that? Do we really believe that? Does it impact the way we live?

Saturday Reflection: (Warning- this reflection is a little wordy so you may want to break it up a bit ;o) Today we'll finish up our week watching Mary's progression down the pathway of peace. We've seen that this pathway isn't a path where no storms come our way or a permanent changing of our emotions from panic/fear/stress/anxiety/worry/fear to tranquility but rather and new way of looking at life and the storms that come our way as we make our way from cradle (or maybe today I should say manger) to grave. It's a place where we hold unwaveringly to the concept that It's all going to be ok in the end. If it's not ok- it's not the end. It's getting used to letting a revolving door of thoughts run through my mind when my mind is threatening to be overrun with fear and doubt:

How do we know it's-all-going-to-be-ok? Because nothing-is-impossible-for-God. So what do we do when it doesn't appear to be ok? Let. It. Be. Why? Because we know it's-all-going-to-be-ok? How do we know that? Because nothing-is-impossible-for-God. So what do we do when it doesn't appear to be ok? Let. It. Be. Why...

I don't know about you but I've had to run that circular reasoning through my mind over and over again at various stormy times in my life. And I imagine Mary had more than one occasion where that reasoning just swirled through her troubled mind as she faced storm after storm in her life. How often did Mary have to be thinking what-is-going-on-here???? And then let's talk about what happens 40 days after Jesus was born (in a stable laid in a manger with nothing but shepherds there to bear witness). We're told in Luke chapter 2 that Jesus' parents took Him to the Temple to "present Him to the Lord" and to make the offerings

required in the Law for a firstborn son. We are told by Luke that Jesus' parents brought the sacrifice of two doves but that doesn't paint a sufficient picture for us. Why would we know that two doves were the most economical sacrifice allowed in the Law of Moses (think "cheapest"). Both Joseph and Mary had to be wondering what was going on. God's Son has been born and only Shepherds came to bear witness to that fact (shepherds were not allowed to testify in first century courts because nobody would believe their testimony so it's kind of strange God would choose shepherds as the only witnesses to this event, isn't it?). Now here they were walking into the Temple with the least costly sacrifice allowed when dedicating a firstborn son. How does any of this make sense? Then this happens:

At that time there was a man in Jerusalem named Simeon. He was righteous and devout and was eagerly waiting for the Messiah to come and rescue Israel. The Holy Spirit was upon him and had revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Messiah. That day the Spirit led him to the Temple. So when Mary and Joseph came to present the baby Jesus to the Lord as the law required, Simeon was there. He took the child in his arms and praised God, saying, "Sovereign Lord, now let your servant die in peace, as you have promised. I have seen your salvation, which you have prepared for all people. He is a light to reveal God to the nations, and he is the glory of your people Israel!" Jesus' parents were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them. Luke 2: 25-33 (NLT)

Joseph and Mary must have been thinking, "ok... this is more like it. We're in the Temple. This guy obviously sees what's happening here. Now this is beginning to make sense..."

And then Simeon says this to Mary:

This child is destined to cause many in Israel to fall, and many others to rise. He has been sent as a sign from God, but many will oppose him. As a result, the deepest thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your very soul." Luke 2:34-35 (NLT)

Say what??? Many will oppose Him? AND A SWORD WILL PIERCE MY VERY SOUL?!?!?!?!

How does that make sense? This is the SON OF GOD! I said let-it-be! I'm doing exactly what God wants me to do... how does that lead to a sword piercing my very soul?!?!?!? (all caps and exclamations are my own- but I imagine Mary experienced them).

Ever felt that way? Ever wondered why life could be going so wrong AFTER you started trying your best to let-it-be? I know I have. I still do. It's human nature. How can you let this happen to me Lord when I'm doing my best to follow the pathway of peace? I've asked it over and over again. You know what I get back? it's-all-going-to-be-ok-in-the-end-if-it's-not-ok-it's-not-the-end.

That is the pathway of peace. Again- not a permanent arrival at a place where there are no storms or even a permanent arrival at a place where storms no longer affect your emotional tranquility but rather a road we walk where we hold on to the thought that it's-all-going-to-be-ok-in-the-end-if-it's-not-ok-it's-not-the-end at all costs no matter what we face. Especially when we face our most intense storms in this life. Mary can feel your pain.

When Jesus is just a toddler some Wisemen come from the east bearing gifts and worshipping this little boy named Jesus. That had to feel at least a bit satisfying to Mary and

the gold, frankincense and myrrh had to help with making ends meet (at least the gold probably did). Then Joseph has a dream that Herod wants to kill the baby and they have to get up and flee to Egypt in the night. How does this make sense? Why is the Messiah going to grow up in Alexandria rather than Jerusalem? When they come back to Israel and stop in Jerusalem during Jesus' twelfth year they somehow leave for Nazareth and it takes two days before they realize Jesus isn't with them (have you watched the movie The Young Messiah? It's fascinating and gives you an idea on what that might have been like):

When they couldn't find him, they went back to Jerusalem to search for him there. Three days later they finally discovered him in the Temple, sitting among the religious teachers, listening to them and asking questions. All who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. His parents didn't know what to think. "Son," his mother said to him, "why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been frantic, searching for you everywhere." "But why did you need to search?" he asked. "Didn't you know that I must be in my Father's house?" Luke 2: 45-49 (NLT)

That had to hurt a little, right? Maybe Mary wonders if the pain she felt when Jesus said those words were the sword that would pierce her very soul? But it just gets weirder for Mary. He doesn't begin His ministry until He's 30 years old. What must she have been thinking during those years? Then He begins His ministry and it's nothing like what she imagined it would be like. He's avoiding all the typical "Messiah" things. He's not about power. He's antagonizing the political and religious power structures of Israel that one would think a person who wanted to be a Messiah would need. At one point Mary and Jesus' family decide Jesus has lost His mind and try to bring Him home:

When his family heard what was happening, they tried to take him away. "He's out of his mind," they said... Then Jesus' mother and brothers came to see him. They stood outside and sent word for him to come out and talk with them. There was a crowd sitting around Jesus, and someone said, "Your mother and your brothers are outside asking for you." Jesus replied, "Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?" Then he looked at those around him and said, "Look, these are my mother and brothers. Anyone who does God's will is my brother and sister and mother." Mark 3:21-35 (NLT)

Jesus isn't following anybody's idea of what the how-to-become-the-messiah-in-three-easy-steps playbook would look like. And when Mary hears Jesus say, "who is my mother, and brother and sisters..." that had to hurt, right? Maybe that's the sword that Simeon guy was talking about.

And then one day Mary sat at the foot of a cross. She watched as her little boy was brutally tortured, ridiculed and ultimately killed. "This has to be it", she must have thought. "This HAS to be the sword that would pierce my very soul. There's no coming back from this. How can there be? How can anything good come from this? How can I hold on to the idea that it's-all-going-to-be-ok-in-the-end-if-it's-not-ok-it's-not-the-end now? I can't. It's over. It's all over."

But was it?

No. It wasn't.

And what fascinates me as much as anything else in this story is the prayer that led to that moment where Jesus hung on a cross and His followers (including His mom) found themselves in a place where it seemed like there was no hope. I'm not talking about Mary's let-it-be prayer now (although it was extremely similar). The prayer I'm wanting to talk about is a prayer Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane:

My Father! If it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine. Matthew 26:39 (NLT)

Not my will but your will be done. Doesn't that prayer sound an awful lot like the prayer Mary prayed when the angel came and told her that she had been chosen to bear the Son of God? Remember her prayer?

Let it be.

In other words- not my will but your will be done.

Then 33 years later that baby that hadn't even been conceived yet when Mary prayed her prayer prayed, "not my will but your will be done."

In other words, let it be.

And we come full circle. And we learn that the powerful and dangerous prayer of Easter (not my will but your will be done) is almost identical to the powerful and dangerous prayer of Christmas- let it be.

So that brings us to me and you. As Christmas approaches I think God comes to each and every one of us and asks us a similar question to Mary- will we say to Him, let it be?

Sure it's not the same part in the story that God has in mind for me and you as He had in mind for Mary and most of us will never become household names like she did. But all of us are invited into God's story and all of us were created to play our own part in that story and it all begins with the dangerous prayer of Christmas- let it be.

Will you pray that prayer today? If you do you will be placing your feet firmly on the pathway of peace. A pathway filled with confusion and fear and then beauty and meaning and joy and then more confusion and fear and then more beauty and joy and then...

Well, you get the picture.

So let's all whisper words of wisdom together this Christmas season:

Let. It. Be.

Merry Christmas everyone (I'll say it again even if it isn't Christmas).