

“Better Angels”

Luke 1:26-56

Julie R. Harley – Advent 4, Dec. 18, 2011

First United Church of Oak Park

We all live in the real world. We spend most of our time eating, sleeping, going to school, working, doing laundry, commuting, walking our dogs and taking out the garbage. Did I mention texting?

It startles me sometimes to realize how many of my thoughts each day revolve around the availability of **coffee**. I rely on it to keep my operating system functioning. Much is demanded of us in the real world.

And in the season of Advent, the four weeks leading up to Christmas, the real world of “things to do” leaps into overdrive. You know the drill: presents, cookies, cards, decorations, musical extravaganzas . . . did I mention **church**?

All of this is designed to give us that special Christmas feeling: the most wonderful time of the year.

But this is also a season that opens us up to the deep reality, the deep consciousness, that we live in a **moral universe**, a world where there is more going on than we realize.

We live in a real world where angels show up.

We live in a real world where miracles happen.

A miracle is what happens when God’s moral purposes trump the physical realities of our world.

Listen to Luke’s gospel: A virgin conceives a child.

How is this possible?

A child born in poverty and obscurity changes the course of human history.

How is this possible?

Advent is a season of angels, who come to average, ordinary, everyday people like us and say, “Nothing is impossible with God.”

We can hear the voice of the angel as spoken by Linus in “A Charlie Brown Christmas” saying, “Do not be afraid. For behold, I bring you good news of great joy which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the City of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” I hope the angel Gabriel looked and sounded a lot like Linus.

This is a time to ponder the great mystery that we live in a moral universe – not just during the month of December – but every day of the year.

We live in a universe where people are so disgusted with the world that they cry out to God, saying, “Break open the heavens and come down!” And God does.

God comes to us in the voice of the better angels of our nature.

And for this brief, shining season, we find ourselves joining with Mary – and saying YES to those better angels of our nature.

We say YES, my soul magnifies the Lord.

We say YES, let it be with me according to your Spirit.

Mary says YES to the angel of God – not based on the evidence she sees around her in the real world. She says YES to what God is doing in the **moral universe**.

And by saying YES, Mary suddenly realizes what God is up to in this moral universe.

- God looks with favor on people who get food stamps.
- God shows mercy to people who get down on their knees and pray.
- God knocks down the Donald Trumps of the world and lifts up those who are humble . . . the ones who don't get picked for any team, who are the first to get downsized.
- God even shows mercy to Israel – God's own children. God loves them so much and yet fights with them all the time – just like what happens in every family. Yet God never gives up. The blessings continue to flow.

I recently saw a study about what creates happiness in love relationships. In the happiest relationships, for every one argument, there are five acts of generosity. No relationship is free of conflict, but the best relationships overflow with acts of service, kindness, and selfless giving.

God shows us how to live by sending us better angels.

Mary's song in Luke celebrates this moral universe, which lies beneath the real world where we spend most of our time.

A phrase used by many civil rights leaders was originally spoken by a Unitarian minister named Theodore Parker, who worked for the abolition of slavery years before the Civil War. He said:

"I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but a little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight. But I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see, I am sure the arc of history bends toward justice."

The arc of history is a long one – we can see only part of it – like a rainbow that disappears into the clouds.

But we know that we live and move and have our being in this **moral universe**, where history bends toward justice.

Even an atheist admits this is true.

Steven Pinker is a Harvard professor who describes himself as a Jewish atheist. He wrote a book called *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*.

The news in this book is so good it is startling! Steven Pinker studied several thousand years of human history and declares: We are living in the most peaceable era in the history of humankind. We enjoy unprecedented levels of peaceful coexistence.

Take a look back just a few thousand years, when things were much different. Even biblical history is incredibly violent.

One researcher calculated that in the Hebrew scriptures there are 1.2 million deaths from mass killings. That is not counting half a million people who died in a battle described in 2 Chronicles 8 (which is considered historically implausible) and 20 million who would have perished in Noah's Flood.

When today's scripture text takes place, Mary and Joseph live in a territory controlled by the Roman Empire.

In the Roman Empire, half a million people died agonizing deaths in spectacles of mass cruelty – under the guise of entertainment – at the Roman Colosseum. Thousands were routinely crucified for petty crimes and sedition, including Jesus, all in the name of the Holy Roman Empire.

When I preached on the first Sunday of Advent, I said that hope is born out of darkness and despair. It is true that human beings are capable of great evil, and we can never forget that we have committed horrific atrocities.

But it is also possible for us to turn to the good, the true and the beautiful when we listen to our better angels.

Pinker's 800-page book demonstrates dozens of ways that we have made progress in the moral universe.

1. Murder rates in the West are **100 times lower** now than they were in the year 1200.
2. Since 1960, the rate of crime in the U.S. has dropped by **half** in every major category: rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny.
3. The execution rate is down to almost zero – while in colonial America **half** of all crimes were punished by execution (including adultery, witchcraft, counterfeiting, and horse theft).
4. Take a look at slavery. In democratic Athens and the Roman Republic (in the time of Christ) **thirty-five percent of the population was enslaved.**

Today slavery has been abolished in most nations.

The origin of the phrase "the better angels of our nature" comes from Abraham Lincoln's First Inaugural Address, delivered to a nation divided and on the verge of civil war over this issue. Lincoln appealed to "the better angels" in hopes that the controversy could be settled through words rather than by the sword.

While his hope was not realized, Lincoln would be proud to see today that the major world powers have not gone to war for decades. We live in a world of fewer wars and less casualties from those wars.

Today we are disturbed by the constant threat of terrorism, but even here there is good news. Al Qaeda has weakened, and while there were 10 serious plots against

Western targets in 2004, there were only three in 2008. We give thanks that our troops have come home from Iraq after nine years, another sign that violence is in decline.

Even in the Middle East – long a hotbed of terrorism and war – Palestinian leaders in the West Bank has disavowed violence. They now pursue change through boycotts, economic divestment and peaceful protest.

Time Magazine’s “Person of the Year” for 2011 is “The Protester.” Whether we are seeking transformation in the Arab Spring, in Occupy Wall Street, or in Chicago Public School board meetings, protesters seek change without great violence and bloodshed.

Religious groups no longer sponsor Crusades and Inquisitions, but they increasingly lobby Congress. Religious advocacy in Washington has quadrupled in the last few years.

Writer James Baldwin said, “The people that once walked in darkness are no longer prepared to do so.” Those of us who live in a moral universe pursue moral change through peaceful advocacy.

Steven Pinker credits the human rights revolution for much of our success in reducing violence: civil rights, women’s rights, children’s rights, gay rights, human rights and animal rights. All of these movements have raised our consciousness about the experience of oppression, resulting in changes in our attitudes and behavior as a society.

Tomas Perez is a husband and a father of three daughters, and he learned that every year in America 100,000 minor girls are forced into prostitution or sex slavery. He listened to his better angels and committed himself to engage 100,000 men in a campaign to raise awareness of sex trafficking and work to eliminate it.

Perez says, “Men created this problem. **Better men** have to solve it.”

What explains the decline of violence and the uprising of peaceful protest?

Could it be that more of us – like Mary – are listening to the better angels of our nature?

These transformations occur with rising IQ scores (yes, we are becoming more intelligent according to measurable scales), the technology and information revolution, and more prominent female leaders. All three winners of the Nobel Peace Prize this year were women from developing nations. It is no coincidence that in our scripture today, the moral revolution called Christianity began with two pregnant women.

While I was waiting at a stoplight this week, I saw a bumper sticker on the car in front of me that seemed to capture the message of my sermon in four short words:

Wag more. Bark less.

When it comes to hearing the voice of an angel, wag more and bark less.

Look for angelic announcements in the joys we celebrate at First United this year.

- We are a warm, welcoming congregation.
- We are spiritually alive.

- We are growing: receiving 17 confirmation students as members, a growing senior high youth group with more than 50 members, and more than 40 adult members who joined this year.
- Pledges for 2012 have exceeded \$700,000 for the first time ever.
- Our budgeting process went smoothly, with genuine discernment.
- Our Faith in Action team initiated a microloan program to provide a step to self-development for people who live within a three-mile radius of the church.
- We celebrate our global outreach too. Our mission accompaniers in Colombia, South America – Mamie Broadhurst and Richard Williams – are in the midst of their third year of global service through the Presbyterian Church USA.
- Gabrielle Worley, who grew up in our church and taught confirmation two years ago, will leave for Lebanon in January to become a missionary through Global Ministries.
- Through the labor pains of several staff transitions this year, we have rebuilt a dream team.
- Marylen Marty-Gentile will be ordained here next year, into her longtime ministry area – staying on our staff as pastor for children and family ministries.
- Rob Leveridge has brought innovations to many areas of our church, including forming a band and composing music for a progressive Christian worship CD.
- Leah Fowler is the first called pastor in the history of First United to be pregnant! We celebrate with Leah and Chris as they await the birth of their first child in February.

We have many reasons to wag more and bark less.

So what do we need to do in response to this good news?

Like Mary, we're simply called to make space in our lives for the better angels of our nature, and say YES. Instead of being full of ourselves, let us instead be full of God.

A local woman named June was inspired last spring to go on a mission trip to Tuscaloosa, Alabama, after that region was hit by devastating tornadoes.

June heard many sad stories, about 8,000 homes destroyed, 50 people killed and the bone-chilling fear as 200 mph winds came through. There were also a few stories of miracles.

A 3-year-old boy was found locked in a horizontal freezer, still alive. His family's home had been demolished by the tornado and all his family members died.

When a rescuer opened the freezer and helped him out, they asked the 3-year-old who had put him in there. The little boy answered, "The man with the wings."

Beneath this very real world lies a moral universe, where nothing is impossible with God.

Let's keep listening to the better angels of our nature.

Let's sing with Mary, "Here I am, Lord. Let it be with me according to your Spirit." Amen.

