

“Let There Be Peace on Earth”

Luke 1: 68-79

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Second Sunday in Advent

Our attention this morning is drawn to the birth of John the Baptist, the prophet who prepared the way for Jesus. Like Jesus, his birth was filled with mystery and hope. You recall, his parents, Elizabeth and Zechariah, were past the normal child bearing years when the angel, Gabriel, told them they were going to have a baby. The element of surprise was as evident here as it was in Jesus’ birth narrative.

Our specific text contains the blessing that Zechariah gave his son, John, after he was born and named. Perhaps you have heard this passage referred to as *The Benedictus*. It appears to be based upon a Jewish Psalm, for the language echoes phrases from the Old Testament. It also answers the question posed by Zechariah and Elizabeth’s neighbors, “What will this child become?”

Zechariah responds to that by saying, “And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High. You will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace” Luke 1:76-79.

It is the end of this blessing that captures my attention today, **“to guide our feet in the way of peace.”** This is the first of fourteen references to peace in Luke’s gospel. This is significant.

Luke connects Jesus with peace throughout his entire gospel. At his birth, the heavenly host sang, “Glory to God in the highest and on earth **peace** to men on whom his favor rests” Luke 2:14. On Palm Sunday when Jesus looked over the Holy City, he said with tears in his eyes, “If you, even you, had known on this day what would bring you **peace**, but now it is hidden from your eyes” Luke 19:42. When Jesus appeared to the frightened disciples after his resurrection, his first words were, **“Peace** be with you” Luke 24:36.

These are but four of the fourteen times that Luke connects Jesus and peace in his gospel. How does this speak to us as we focus upon peace on this second Sunday in Advent?

For me, it is this. **It is God’s desire that we have peace in our hearts and that we live in peace with others.**

One of my favorite poets, Maya Angelou, captured God’s passion for peace in her poem, “Amazing Peace: A Christmas Poem.” It is the story of a family who joins with their community-rich and poor, black and white, Christian, Muslim and Jew-to celebrate the holidays. Ms. Angelou read this poem for the first time at the 2005 lighting of the Christmas tree at the White House. Let me share a portion of this poem with you this morning.

Hope is born again on the faces of children.

It rides on the shoulders of our aged as they walk into their sunsets.

Hope spreads around the earth, brightening all things,

Even hate, which crouches breeding in dark corridors.

In our joy, we think we hear a whisper.

At first it is too soft. Then only half heard.

We listen carefully as it gathers strength.

We hear a sweetness.

The word is Peace.

It is loud now.

Louder than the explosion of bombs.

We tremble at the sound. We are thrilled by its presence.
 It is what we have hungered for.
 Not just the absence of war. But true peace.
 A harmony of spirit, a comfort of courtesies.
 Securities for our beloveds and their beloveds.
 We clap hands and welcome the Peace of Christmas.
 We beckon this season to wait a while with us.
 We, Baptist and Buddhist, Methodist and Muslim, say come.
 Peace.
 Come fill us and our world with your majesty.
 We, the Jew and Jainist, the Catholic and the Confucian,
 Implore you to stay awhile with us
 So we may learn by your shimmering light
 How to look beyond complexion and see community.
 It is Christmas time, a halting of hate time.
 On this platform of peace, we can create a language
 To translate ourselves to ourselves and to each other.
 At this Holy Instant, we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ
 Into the great religions of the world.
 We jubilate the precious advent of trust.
 We shout with glorious tongues the coming of hope.
 All the earth's tribes loosen their voices
 To celebrate the promise of Peace.
 We, Angles and Mortals, Believers and Nonbelievers,
 Look heavenward and speak the word aloud.
 Peace.
 We look at our world and speak the word aloud.
 Peace.
 We look at each other, then into our selves,
 And we say without shyness or apology or hesitation:
 Peace my Brother.
 Peace my Sister.
 Peace my Soul.

How do we find peace in our hearts in a world filled with suspicion, conflict, anxiety and fear? Luke tells us. According to him, peace comes to those who receive Jesus.

This was true for Simeon (2:29), the woman who wept at Jesus' feet (7:50), and the woman with a hemorrhage (8:48). Each of them was restless, yet through faith each one found peace, and so can we.

For you see, peace is not the absence of conflict, but the presence of God in our lives, walking with us along our journey. As a loving and responsible parent, He helps us to handle life's challenges by graciously providing the companionship, encouragement and love we need. Whatever we face, it is never alone. Always and at all times, He is with us.

"For this, I have Jesus," my friend of many years ago reminded me each time she faced a stiff challenge. By faith, all of us can have this assurance.

Can you say what my friend does each time she faces a challenge? Have you accepted Jesus into your life and asked him to accompany you along your journey? Do you seek his guidance and follow where he leads? Based upon what Luke writes, nothing would please him more. I hope you will receive the gift of salvation from him today and discover this peace that comes from knowing he is always with you.

I also hope you will do everything possible to live in peace with others and to promote peace on earth. This, too, is God's desire.

How do you live in peace with others? There is only one way. Peace is based upon justice, something Martin Luther King, Jr. reminded us of often. “Peace is not the absence of conflict,” he said, “but the presence of justice.”

So, what is justice? It is doing what is right, correcting what is wrong and restoring to wholeness those who are victims of injustice or indifference. It works hard to make sure that all people have the same freedoms, opportunities and rights because every person counts in God’s kingdom.

Look at the words associated with justice in the Bible: widow, fatherless, orphans, poor, hungry, needy, weak and oppressed. Those who pursue justice demand the same standards and privileges for the little and forgotten people of the world as the wealthy and influential.

From those who have led in the pursuit of justice, I have learned that when we want for all children what we want for our own, peace will prevail. Peace will occur when people work to provide for everyone pure drinking water, clean air, nutritious food, warm beds, adequate clothing, quality education, medical attention, good paying jobs, safe places for children to play and fair ways of settling disputes. It is the absence of these basic elements needed to sustain life that leads to jealousy and violence.

How do you build just relationships, starting with your family and friends? How do you develop just relationships at work, in school, in your neighborhood and in the marketplace? How do you promote peace on earth, as Luke did so fervently? I believe it begins by making sure that everyone has a seat at the table of decision-making so that everybody’s needs are heard and influence is felt. Isn’t this what Luke was trying to teach us through his account of John’s birth? Let’s look at it in more depth.

Luke begins the Christmas story by focusing our attention upon the birth of John the Baptist, the last Old Testament prophet and forerunner of Jesus. As mentioned earlier, his birth was filled with mystery and hope, as Jesus’ was. His parents, Elizabeth and Zechariah, received a visit from Gabriel, just as Mary did, telling them that they were going to have a child.

Perhaps the most notable part of this story is the fact that Zechariah was unable to speak the entire time that Elizabeth carried their child. You recall that Zechariah asked Gabriel how it was possible for them to have a child since they were so old. Because he did this, he was told that he would be left speechless until the child was born. I find this quite intriguing.

Who among us would not have asked the same question? Was Zechariah being punished for doing something any of us would have done? Perhaps, but I think there are other reasons.

I see Zechariah’s inability to speak as a sign that he was not delusional. Something happened while he was performing his priestly duties that would change his life forever. His prayers for a son were going to be answered in the coming months. This promise from God was real and this sign affirmed it.

Let’s dig deeper. Was this God’s way of showing Zechariah that it was not time for speaking, but listening, reflecting, praying and learning? I think so and find this quite common. What did Jesus do when he began his public ministry? He went to the wilderness to think, reflect and pray. What did Paul do after his conversion? He spent three years in Arabia meditating and reflecting upon his conversion experience. Now it was Zechariah’s turn to listen, reflect, pray and learn. His future and ours demanded it.

Let’s go a little deeper. I see something in the first chapter of Luke that must not be overlooked. In Luke 1, men are strangely quiet. Zechariah’s voice was taken away and Joseph never speaks. The words of Elizabeth and Mary are the ones heard, recorded and remembered. As you know from your study of ancient cultures, this was highly unusual. For the most part, women were seen and not heard.

Why does Luke focus our gaze upon them and make their words immortal? They spoke of the kind of world they wanted for their children, a new social order based upon justice, compassion, humility, mercy, generosity, tolerance and peace. They offered a vision of God and His dreams for all mankind that was different from the religious and secular leaders of their time.

Evidently, Luke considered their vision important. It must have described the kind of world he dreamed of, too, and wanted to add his voice to the mix.

Is Luke telling us that the way to develop relationships based upon justice is to listen to voices that get drowned out at others times by the clamor of our culture's more powerful noises? I think so. Listening to those who are normally ignored or discounted is mandatory in the pursuit of justice. Considering their hopes and dreams as well as their needs is as important as voicing our own.

When I meet with people whose relationship is marked by conflict and charged with anger, I usually discover that communication has severely dwindled or completely come to a halt. So, the first thing I have to do is to get them to suspend their understanding of truth and quit trying to convince the other person to come around to their viewpoint, which always ends in an explosive shouting match. I try to get them to listen to each other and voice, not their desires, but the other person's. My goal is to get them to walk in the other person's shoes and see life from that perspective. This, I feel, is critical to achieving peace based upon justice. It is, at least, the first step.

Is this what you need to do today? In order to find peace in your relationships, do you need to be a better listener? Do you need to care as much about the needs of your mate, parents, children, friends or neighbors as your own? Do you need to enlarge the table where decisions are made so that everyone feels welcome and safe? Do you need to make sure that all decisions made will benefit everyone, not just those with the most clout or loudest voice? I think so and I believe you can, especially if you have the Prince of Peace in your heart. I am convinced he will help you.