

December 5, 2021
“Preparing for Peace”
Luke 1:68-79 / Luke 3:1-6
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

Last week, to begin our Advent journey, we talked about hope. This week, peace. In this sacred season of preparation, preparing for peace.

Without hope, there can be no peace, peace within or peace without. No hope, no peace. As Albert Camus once wrote, “. . . how hard it must be to live only with what one knows and what one remembers, and deprived of what one hopes. . . . There is no peace without hope.”

Back in August we encountered a verse from Ephesians, set in the context of a longer description of the so-called armor of God: “As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace.”

This morning we find a similar appeal, as Amy just read for us, out of the mouth of Zechariah, the priest and father of John who will become known as John the baptizer, prophesying about the role his newborn son will play in preparing the way for Jesus, preparing the way for THE WAY: “By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

Put on your feet whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. In your tender mercy, O God, guide our feet into the way of peace. Peace within and peace without.

You may know that in this story, for the previous nine months and change, Zechariah had been mute. Unable to speak. Earlier in the first chapter of Luke, the angel Gabriel appears to him and Zechariah is terrified, overwhelmed with fear. Gabriel tries to calm his fear and then pronounces that his wife, Elizabeth, will become pregnant and bear a son, to be named John.

An answer to his prayer, for sure, but an entirely unexpected answer because Elizabeth – like Sarah and other biblical women before her – is barren and of advanced age. So Zechariah is skeptical and wants some proof: “How will I know that this is so?” he asks. “For I am an old man, and my wife is getting up in years.”

And BECAUSE he doesn't believe the good news, his ability to share that good news is taken away. He's rendered mute until John is born. So after John is born, now filled with the Spirit, his voice erupts in praise and HOPE – concluding with these verses, which I repeat again both because they are pure poetry, and because they speak as much as anything to the promise and preparation of Advent: “By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us” – and some ancient authorities say, “has broken upon us” – “to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

The dawn of the light, here, echoes the Psalmist and the prophet, Isaiah, alluding to a promised liberation of those imprisoned, freed from the darkness of captivity. Those imprisoned in one form or another.

Hope that leads to peace. No hope, no peace.

In our other reading from Luke's gospel, John is all grown up. Doing the work of preparation to which he was called, to which we all are called.

Preaching a baptism of repentance and forgiveness of sin, or RELEASE from sin is probably a better translation of the Greek word, *aphesis*, used here. Sin itself understood as a form of captivity, so RELEASE from anything that holds us captive, that separates and isolates us, individually and collectively, from the God of Love and divine Love in each other and in ourselves. And with RELEASE, the invitation to turn back to God, and the God in each other and in ourselves. To turn back to Love, and love for each other and ourselves.

John the baptizer anticipates Jesus who will come after him, and further echoes the prophets who went before him. Quoted from the prophet, Isaiah, we get these illustrious words: “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord,

make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

That is a figurative, but profoundly prophetic, vision of what justice looks like. Of justice that, like hope, must also precede peace, because there also can be no peace without justice. No justice, no peace!

And here we CANNOT, MUST NOT, lose sight of the social, political and religious context in which John is operating. The author of Luke's gospel won't let us! In fact, Luke's gospel is the only one that places this emphasis.

Chapter 3 begins, "In the fifteenth year of the reign of EMPEROR TIBERIUS, when PONTIUS PILATE was governor of Judea, and HEROD was ruler of Galilee, and his brother PHILIP ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and LYSANIAS ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of ANNAS and CAIAPHAS, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness."

That's the kind of list we might be inclined to skip over, where our eyes tend to gloss over when reading, but the author of Luke includes it for a reason as part of his overall literary strategy. Make no mistake, John is preaching his good news under the oppressive imperial thumb of Roman military occupation. Empire.

And so what John is doing – again anticipating Jesus, in more ways than one – is decidedly political, ultimately challenging empire and threatening (as we will soon find out) the political and religious status quo. Life as it IS, challenged by a vision of life as it CAN YET BE, as we talked about last week.

And so, too, the author of Luke's gospel means for us to notice and UNDERSTAND, within this long litany of both political and religious, regional and national, authorities of the day, that the "word of God" DOES NOT COME to Tiberius. Or Pontius Pilate. Or Herod. Or Caiaphas, in all their military-backed power, but to "John son of Zechariah." It's worth noting here that the Greek phrase we find in Luke, translated "the word of God came to John," is identical to the phrase used in the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation

of Hebrew Scripture, in the book of Jeremiah – the prophet Jeremiah, to whom “the word of God came.”

Luke's gospel is reminding us where divine power and authority reside. John the baptizer continues in a long line of prophets preparing the way for new life and true, lasting peace, shalom. And the verse in Luke goes on, “the word of God came to John son of Zechariah . . . in the wilderness.” Not in the halls of power, to be perfectly clear, but IN THE WILDERNESS. The wilderness, of all places.

But then, from where else can the gospel come? Where else can the good news of hope, and the promise of liberation and justice and peace, take root and grow out OF and take shape IN but the wilderness of our lives, the wilderness of the world we share?

The Advent journey reminds us that there is hope, there is ALWAYS hope, and that there WILL BE liberation from all that holds us captive.

There WILL BE justice that fills every valley and makes low every mountain and hill. That makes straight all that is crooked, and makes smooth all that is rough.

And where there is hope and justice, there CAN be peace. If we are prepared for it, if we prepare for it. In the world, even in the dark shadows of empire. In our hearts and in our lives, even in what feels like wilderness.

The dawn from on high WILL break upon us, IS breaking upon us, to give light to those of us who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death. And so with that promise and toward that vision, friends, may we be hope-bearers, justice-seekers and peacemakers all, preparing the Way in the wilderness like John the baptizer.

May we put on our feet whatever will make us ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. And may God, in God's tender mercy, guide our feet into the way of peace. Peace within and peace without.

May it be so.