

The Way of Peace

Our story from Luke 1 about naming a child¹ reminds me of a video on YouTube titled “The challenge of naming our eleventh child.”² In it, the parents of an interracial, international, preacher’s family talk about choosing a name for their new daughter. Unlike Zechariah the mother reports, “I prayed about a lot of my kids’ names, and I never get a name from God.” The couple also admits that when you have your eleventh child there’s a good chance you might have already used up all your favorite names.

Peace is one of the names they considered, but while people from many cultures and languages use their word for peace as a name, English is one language that doesn’t use it very often. The mother’s brother warned, “If you name that child Peace, you’re asking for it. She’s not going to be peaceful at all.”

So then they went through a list of names that mean peace while also considering a few Swahili names and other names like Grace and Mercy. They knew that once they named the child, whatever the name was, they would be good with it. At 23 hours and 52 minutes after their baby’s birth, 8 minutes before they left the hospital, they settled on the name Peace.

The reactions were positive with people saying, “I’ve never heard that before. I love it” or “That’s what our world needs right now, peace.” And so far, the baby’s uncle’s prediction hasn’t come true. She’s the most peaceful baby. She lives up to her name.

The traditional theme for this second Sunday of Advent is *peace*. This year we are dared to imagine the wideness of God’s embrace of all creatures and creation. The hope is that this will widen our hearts to do the things that make for peace.

In the Bible, peace refers to much more than the absence of war. The peace of God – the peace that comes from God – includes harmony, wholeness, restoration, serenity, contentment, consolation, and stability. We refer to this expanded definition of peace as *shalom*. The scriptures we read today invite us to walk in the way of peace. They encourage us to enter God’s all-encompassing embrace. They instruct us on how to walk in the way of peace.

The title of my sermon comes from the words of Zechariah that were paraphrased in the story we heard earlier and the song we sang in response. Here’s how it reads in the NRSV. *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.*³

Zechariah’s prophecy in Luke 1:68-79 is often referred to as a New Testament Psalm. This passage is a burst of praise by Zechariah when his son, John (commonly referred to as John the Baptist) was 8 days old.⁴ Luke identifies the words of Zechariah as Spirit inspired prophecy.⁵

In verses 68-75, Zechariah praises God for sending “a mighty savior for us.” This is Jesus, not John. God’s promises will be kept, Israel’s hopes will be fulfilled, God’s covenant with Abraham will be remembered, and all enemies will be overthrown.

In verses 76-79, Zechariah speaks about how John will prepare the way for Jesus. He provides a summary of what John will do and what Jesus will do. John will go before the Lord, Jesus, to prepare the way for him and will teach the people about salvation. John’s mission is focused on repentance for the forgiveness of

¹ Luke 1:1-25, 57-80

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RDIB4s8t99g>

³ Luke 1:78-79, *New Revised Standard Version*

⁴ Sources for this sermon include Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, and Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching Through the Christian Year: Year C*, Trinity Press International, 1994, pp. 7-13; David L. Tiede, “Luke,” *The HarperCollins Study Bible Student Paperback Edition*, HarperCollins Publishers, 1993, p. 1958; Douglas E. Wingeier, *Keeping Holy Time: Year C*, Abingdon Press, 2003, pp. 18-23; and *Leader, Fall 2021*, MennoMedia, pp. 40-42.

⁵ Luke 1:68

their sins. Jesus will give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death. He will guide their feet into the way of peace. Jesus' mission is focused on liberation, freedom, and peace.

Luke reminds his hearers of what is written in the Hebrew Scriptures by drawing heavily from Psalms, Malachi, and Isaiah. He emphasizes God's faithfulness to God's promises, especially in the arrival of Jesus as fulfillment of those promises.

How does the hoped-for shalom described here connect with your longings? How does it connect with the longings within our congregation? Within our community?

Last week I suggested that our time of waiting for the completion of the renovation project helps us to better identify with all those we read about in the Bible who waited in expectation for the messiah, the mighty savior coming from the house of David. When I said those words, I never imagined that this Sunday we'd be sitting on our new chairs in our newly carpeted and painted sanctuary. It certainly feels as if the "dawn from on high has broken upon us." Our longings for a renovated space in which to worship together have been fulfilled. Our hope is that this will be a more inviting space for us and for those who are seeking a community of faith.

But, of course, there are there many other longings in our lives and in our community that cannot be addressed with carpet and paint. By choosing an advent project of collecting funds to assist Catholic Charities in Dodge City with the resettlement of Afghani refugees, we hope we will help several families to find peace. Part of our mission as a congregation is to help others to walk in the way of peace.

In the third chapter, Luke describes the work of the grown-up John the Baptist.⁶

The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

"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.'"

Luke writes this description of John's ministry after placing it in historical context by mentioning the political and religious leaders of the day.⁷ He then places the ministry of John in the context of salvation history. He states that John's work is the fulfillment of prophecy found in Isaiah 40. A few chapters later, he also cites prophecy from the book of Malachi. Luke wants his readers to think of John as part of the line of Hebrew prophets, the ones we read about in what we call the Old Testament. John prepares the people for God's coming by preaching about "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." His message includes a call to make paths straight, to fill valleys, to bring down mountains, to make the crooked straight, and to make the rough places smooth.

John and the prophets who came before him stirred up the people's hearts and minds, challenging them to repent and get ready. Malachi gave this prophecy.⁸

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

⁶ Luke 3:2b-6, *New Revised Standard Version*

⁷ Luke 3:1-2a

⁸ Malachi 3:1-4, *New Revised Standard Version*

Malachi reports that the one who is coming will purify and refine the people. God's action in Advent, like the refiner's fire that burns away impurities, reveals our true selves. A fisherman I know describes how this refining happens. When he and his father would melt lead to make the weights for their fishing lines, the impurities would rise to the top. They would skim these off, and more would appear, over and over again. It seemed like this process of purification could go on forever.

For each of us, self-examination and repentance could, and should, be a lifelong process. Malachi reminds us that God's embrace requires repentance, a turning from our ways of harm and a turning to the God whose way is love. When we turn from our ways of harm, we realize the promise found in Luke: "All flesh shall see the salvation of God." We are able to walk in the way of peace.

What are some ways of harm present in your life that need repentance before you can experience the full embrace of God? What is present in the life of our congregation that needs repentance?

If Malachi's "purifying fire" becomes too much to handle, we can turn to the softer words of Zechariah, *By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us*. Even as we go through this process, we can trust that God will bring to completion the good work begun in us as Paul describes in his letter to the Philippians.⁹ Here are Paul's words.

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.

It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus.

And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Dare to imagine God's embrace. Philippians 1 is brimming with "embrace" imagery. There's Paul's love for the Philippians and their love for him. There's the reference to Jesus' compassion. And then there's the prayer for a love that overflows with wisdom and leads to righteousness.

Even as we recognize our imperfections and need for repentance, we can celebrate the love that is present in our lives, within this congregation, and in this community. I'm grateful that "Jesus' compassion" is evident among us. I pray that our love might become even more and more rich with knowledge and all kinds of insight. I pray this so that we will be able to decide what really matters. I pray that we will be filled with the fruit of righteousness, which comes from Jesus Christ, in order to give glory and praise to God.¹⁰

God's desire is to complete a good work within us. God's desire is to burn off the impurities and reveal our true selves. God's desire is for us to repent and get ready. God's desire is to bring light to our dark places and guide us in the way of peace. All of these are part of God's mercy dawning on us and washing over us.

As individuals and as a congregation, let's imagine the wideness of God's embrace of all creatures and creation. This will widen our hearts to do the things that make for *peace*. This will help us to walk in the way of peace. Be assured that the God who has begun a good work in us will bring it to completion.

Thanks be to God.

⁹ Philippians 1:3-11, *New Revised Standard Version*

¹⁰ Adapted from Philippians 1:9-11, *Common English Bible*