

Dare to Imagine Peace

Advent 2021-Week 2

Luke 1:68-79

Good Morning Church family-both those in our family here this morning and those in our family who are watching at home.

The second Sunday of Advent is Peace Sunday. We light the second candle to symbolize our desire for God's peace to arrive in our world, God's desire for the good flourishing of all people and all creation in our world. Last week, on Hope Sunday, we talked about keeping watch and staying alert to the ways that we see God at work in the world. How God is always up to something, even when evidence seems to point otherwise. God often shows up in people, places or situations that we least expect it. Our text for this morning tells the origin story of one of the most interesting, and downright strange figures in the Bible- John the Baptist.

John was the prophet who foretold the arrival of Jesus and his ministry just before he arrived. He's depicted in scripture as a bit of a wild man of the wilderness. A man who lived on locusts and wild honey. A man who was not afraid to say what he thought, not afraid to call everyone, from the religious leaders to tax collectors to repentance and forgiveness. The story of his birth is filled with strange events, with God showing up unexpected moments.

John is the child of Elizabeth and Zachariah. Zacharias was the priest in the temple and he and his wife had no children. They were advanced in years and had been unable to conceive. The angel Gabriel appears to Zacharias in the temple and says they will have a son, and this child will prepare the way for the Lord. Zacharias is doubtful, and who could blame him? It seemed too impossible, too strange, too much to hope for. Yet, Gabriel is frustrated when Zacharias expresses his doubt, and, seemingly as punishment, renders Zacharias mute until the baby is born.

Zacharias emerges from the temple unable to speak. He gestures, he signs, people deduce that he has seen a vision. But what kind of vision? Elizabeth discovers she is pregnant and keeps it concealed for five months. This discovery, too tender, too precious to share with a community who will ask questions, prod for further details, ask what will be done with this baby, who arrives to old parents, to a mute father. What kind of family will this be?

The time comes for this tiny being to make his arrival in the world, and we read this in Luke 1:57-68, so these are the verses immediately before the passage that Char read for us this morning, "Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, but his mother answered, "No; he shall be called John." And they said to her, "None of your relatives is called by this

name.” And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, “His name is John.” And they all wondered. And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, “What then will this child be?” For the hand of the Lord was with him.” Zachaias then utters his song of praise which we head this morning

What then will this child be? What then will this child be? God has shown up, unexpectedly, in the birth of a baby to a barren woman, rendered a man temporarily mute, given this child a totally unexpected name. Zachaias sings his song of praise and prophecy, “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us[h] from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

I love that line, “whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness.” We Saskatchewanians know something about the sunrise visiting us, especially in these dark December days. I’ll be the first to admit, the darkness of December gets to me. This time of year it’s fully 8:30 in the morning before the first streaks of dawn hit the horizon. I wave to Junia out the front window as she tromps off

to school in the gray, almost morning air. The night is so long. But when it finally comes, I notice. I notice in a way that I never do in high summer. I notice the sun with excitement, joy and relief. "Kids! Look! It's getting light out!" This is precisely the feeling that Zacharias song called the people of Israel too, and the echoes that song still calls to us in advent, "Take notice! Light is about to dawn! Something is about to break open!"

And John's official ministry as the one who will prepare the way breaks open in Luke Chapter 3. What kind of ministry will this be? What kind of ministry will this be? Listen to the words from Luke 3: 7-14, " He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." And the crowds asked him, "What then shall we do?" And he answered them, "Whoever has two tunics[b] is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise." Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Collect no more than you are authorized to do." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages."

John's ministry, John's preparation for Jesus, his work to make crooked paths straight,

valleys filled and mountains made low came centered on a simple question and a most difficult answer- Repeat. Turn from your sins. Aim yourselves towards God. Live in God's ways. This is how the light of God can shine into your lives and how you can shine the light of God into this world.

With John's story and message coming to us this morning through scripture, we can ask ourselves, what kind of church will we become? What kind of church will become? We can ask this question of both the big C church, the global church, and our church here, in Langham. What does it look like to be a church of peace? To be a church that wants and works together for the flourishing of all things? In John's ministry, peace and justice go hand in hand. There are beautiful, poetic, prophetic utterances about light, and God making his way. And there are down in the dirt, boots of the ground demands of love from your neighbours. Don't hoard your wealth, give to those in need. Don't give others a raw deal; be fair and honest.

Often, we see that pendulum swing wildly from one direction to the next. There is an observed tension in the broader Mennonite Church both in Canada and the United States of a turn towards an exclusively social gospel, that is a way of doing church that is mostly concerned with doing just things in the world-such as dismantling racism, environmental protection, or fair trade economies. These are good, wonderful, things that are no doubt close to the heart of God. Please don't hear me say that these things aren't important, or good. But the problem can be that it becomes a "good" world of our

own making, a kingdom we design, rather than God's Kingdom that we serve in. And the story of human history tells us that we're pretty hopeless at building kingdoms, and that we need God's help. We are not infinite.

On the other hand, we also don't want to become a church where as long as we have Jesus in our hearts, as long as we have our eternal security, we don't need to see beyond our own walls, our own little group. As long as we love Jesus internally, emotionally, then that's all we need. Or as the old saying goes, "She's so heavenly minded, she's no earthly good."

What kind of church will we be? As our text for this morning shows us, the Kingdom of God is beautifully visionary and unfailingly practical. It's Peace and Justice. It's repenting and living in God's ways. It's Jesus and our neighbours. It's God with Us. What kind of church will we be?

As we prepare the way of the Lord in our lives, in our church and in our world this advent season. How can I answer this question faithfully? How can we be a people of peace?

One possible way would be to ask who in your life is calling you to live more peacefully, to live into the flourishing of all things? Your spouse, a therapist, a good book, a friend? Who is challenging you to nurture your own spiritual practices or help you see needs around you, or both? Those people in our lives are so valuable. How can we seek out

those people? How can we be those people for others?

This Advent could be a season for self-reflection. For examining our hearts and our motivations. Am I drifting away from Jesus and his story? Am I turning a blind eye to neighbours or the needs around me? We often talk about Advent as a season of preparation, of making room for the Prince of Peace to arrive. We can ask, like the tax collector, like the soldier, like the crowds, “What then shall we do?”

My own moment of “What then shall I do?” came to me unexpectedly, this week. I’ll confess that I am someone who struggles with rest, with just being, and believing that I am worthy just because I am created and loved by God. Call it anxiety, call it protestant work ethic, but I fall into the trap of believing that my value is tied to my productivity, to accomplishing enough tasks, by making enough people happy. If I were to ask myself, “What then shall I do?” -my answer would be: a million things! More handwritten cards! A better meal plan! More charitable giving! DO MORE THINGS! And I was caught this week, so deeply in the whirlwind of course work, pastoral work, home life, and DOING ALL THE THINGS, that I was internally (and Taylor would probably say externally) frantic. There wasn’t enough time and I had to do it all and I was burning the candle at both ends to do it. And then, in the wee hours of Wednesday, I turned over in bed, stomach lurching with cramps and I realized, “Oh no. I caught the stomach flu from the kids.” And I was forced to rest. I didn’t get Junia off to school. I didn’t write a sermon. I stayed in bed, napped many hours, sipped gatorade and I just had to be. I was wholly

unproductive. And it was so good. I woke up the next morning feeling much better, in many ways. The work was still there, the deadlines the same, but that forced rest gave me perspective.

The answer of “What then shall we do?” will look different for each of us, as it did for each person who asked that question of John the Baptist. The answer changes based on your context, on your roles in life. But it’s a question worth asking as we seek to prepare the way of the Lord together. What kind of church will we be? What then shall we do?

Let’s pray.