



"The Path of Peace"
Scripture – Luke 1:67-79
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, December 5, 2021

In 21st century North America, we Protestants have our feet planted in two worlds – the sacred and the secular. This may be most obvious during the weeks leading up to Christmas. Our society encourages us to prepare for Christmas by buying, baking, and bedecking, and there is much to be said for this emphasis. Buying gifts for others, enjoying a festive meal, and beautifying our homes are good for the soul. And, yet, people of faith know that these are not enough. In the depths of our souls are longings and the church dares to contemplate them.

Advent spurs us to name some of our deepest desires: hope, joy, love, and peace. Instead of simply learning to tolerate our world as it is, we risk dreaming dreams of a different world, a far better one.

Don't we long for a world where cities must transition their police officers into new careers because there is so little crime? Don't we long for a world where all children are hugged and none are hit? Don't we long for a world where no more soldiers need to be sent to war? Don't we long for a day when no student walks into his school and opens fire on his classmates?

On the second Sunday of Advent, followers of Christ name our longing for peace. We yearn for peace in our souls, peace in our relationships, and as the angels heralded the shepherds, "Peace on earth."

Yet, doesn't peace seem so absent from the world we inhabit that it is tempting to relegate it to the world of fantasy? Perhaps visions of peace should be reserved for idealistic young people or Disney films. Is peace in our world such a preposterous ideal that we must yank back on the reins and only allow ourselves to imagine personal inner peace?

Or might it be that peace in our souls can arouse us to broaden the spectrum of peace in our fractious world?

Today's passage is known as the Song of Zechariah. The old priest and his wife, Elizabeth are in their golden years when Elizabeth stuns all the neighbors by announcing that she is with child. This is like someone who lives in a retirement community ringing her neighbors and saying, "Are you sitting down?"

However improbable, Elizabeth gives birth to a healthy baby and eight days later Zechariah is in the temple clutching his newborn son. He is filled with God's Spirit and breaks into song. If it were a Broadway musical, he would sing of the joy of being a father, but channeling God's Spirit, his song foreshadows the destiny of his son and their nation. Despite the gloom of being oppressed by their enemies, God will soon call forth a savior. And

this infant in his arms – John – will go before the savior to prepare the people for his coming. Then, Zechariah wraps up his song with these words: “By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high (meaning Jesus) will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

In mentioning the Romans who occupy their land and suppress them with their swords, it is clear that Zechariah’s declaration of Jesus guiding our feet into the way of peace does not refer to an escapist spirituality that focuses solely on peace of heart and mind. Zechariah envisions better living conditions – more food, more freedom, more justice, more mercy. However, Zechariah does not declare that Christ will unilaterally establish a reign of peace. He says that Christ will guide *our* feet into the way of peace. He will show *us* the path that leads to shalom.

Donna Hicks, a Harvard trained conflict resolution specialist, recalls the day she was in a jammed subway station. A train pulled in and opened its doors, a crowd of people poured out and there was a fair amount of pushing and shoving. “One young man, iPod plugged in, bumped into another man on the platform, nearly knocking him down. The young man immediately apologized. He confessed he had not been paying attention. But the man he had knocked into was so furious that he wanted to fight. He yelled obscenities and goaded him to put up his fists. A couple of people with him held him back from taking a swing.”

“[Hicks said she] could see the fellow with the iPod struggling not to respond. He took several deep breaths and stood motionless with his eyes fixed on the would-be pugilist. Hicks thought he was on the verge of pouncing on the man. Instead, he put the earbuds back in his ears, readjusted his backpack, and walked away. The other man continued screaming at him as the train doors closed behind him and the train pulled away. Hicks watched the hot-headed man’s friends still attempting to calm him down while the young man with the iPod walked up the exit ramp and out of sight.”¹

All of us experience situations where there is a strong temptation to lash back at people who hurt us. If not physically, at least verbally. Who among us has not felt the sting of criticism and lashed back with a cutting remark of our own? Who among us has not yearned for the sweet taste of revenge rather than taking the more difficult path that can lead to peace?

Barbara Brown Taylor mentions what many of us have thought. It’s easier to love humanity in general than human beings in particular. “Love is hard. Justice and peace cost more than we have budgeted for them. Respect the dignity of every human being? I will, with God’s help. Just please don’t tell me how they vote.”²

Sometimes it feels as if these are the most contentious years of my life. Political divisions are stark. Conversations can easily become brittle. Vindictiveness seems to have ascended to new heights as a winner-take-all mentality has driven the thought of compromise to the sidelines. Peacemaking is much more challenging than fighting. And yet, Jesus made it clear in the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.”

Above the Sea of Galilee, high on a hill called the Mount of Beatitudes, there is a church. And along the path leading up to it, each of the blessings Jesus pronounced is in brass letters on large stones.

Can you think of someone you have known who was a peacemaker? Perhaps you never used that term for her, but on close examination, that is what she was. She was fair-minded and expected others to be fair in their dealings. She was honest and expected others to be honest. When she disagreed, it was never intended as a threat. She knew that people did not have to agree with one another to get along.

Jesus was an authority on love, joy and peace because he experienced firsthand hatred, sorrow and turmoil. He knew how hatred could destroy natural bonds between people, how sorrow could plunge us into despair, and how turmoil could keep our souls in constant turbulence. So he taught the importance of keeping our focus on love of God and neighbor. He highlighted the necessity of forgiveness. He encouraged us never to abandon hope. And he showed us the critical nature of remaining connected to the only One who can fill us with serenity in the midst of distress. And having peace in our soul not only helps us weather the personal storms of life, it can also transform the world around us.

Do you know the story behind the creation of the Pfizer vaccine? Two Turkish-born scientists – a husband and wife – who worked on cancer treatments created the vaccine. However, they realized that there were very few companies on earth that had the capacity to test it, manufacture it and distribute it quickly. They needed to form a global partnership. They formed it with Pfizer. Referring to Pfizer's chief executive who is Greek, the husband said, "We realized that he is from Greece, and we are from Turkey," two traditional enemies. Nevertheless, they developed a bond of trust and cooperation because the importance of the vaccine was so immense.

What would happen if enough people came to their senses that they realized the health and welfare of the people of our planet depended on working together rather than at odds with one another?

Many have given up on peace. They've tried it in personal relationships and been burned. Further, they have no hope that working for peace will produce tangible results. There are larger forces at play and individuals have little possibility of moving the needle in the right direction. But do we strive for peace only when we think we can achieve meaningful success?

In his bestselling book, *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates writes, "History is not solely in our hands. And still you are called to struggle, not because it assures you victory but because it assures you an honorable and sane life."³

You cannot control the behavior of others, but you make choices every minute how you will live. In these days leading to our celebration of the birth of Christ – our light in the darkness – may we rededicate ourselves to living an honorable and sane life by choosing the path of peace.

NOTES

1. Donna Hicks, *Dignity: Its Essential Role in Resolving Conflict*, (New Haven: University Press, 2011, p. 98-99.
2. Barbara Brown Taylor, *Always a Guest*, (Louisville: WestminsterJohnKnoxPress, 2020), p. 56.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 59.