



Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Scripture: Luke 1:67-79
"The Way of Peace"
December 6, 2009

Serving a congregation in one of the roughest areas of the Bronx, pastor Heidi Neumark says that Advent resonates with her better than any other liturgical season. During Lent, when the focus is repentance, she might not be feeling regretful. At Easter she might not feel all that victorious. When Pentecost arrives, she might not feel inspired and energized by God's Spirit. However, during Advent, she is always in sync with the season because Advent connects with the reality of her life. Longing.¹

She is longing for a better world, and aren't we all? Don't we long for a world where feeding ministries close their doors for lack of clients? Don't we long for a world where cities lay off police officers because there is so little crime? Don't we long for a world where children are hugged not hit, the poor are not neglected, everyone has health care and no more soldiers are sent off to war?

Advent is the season when followers of Christ long for peace. We yearn for peace in our souls, peace in our relationships, and as the angels called out to the shepherds, "Peace on earth." Yet, while we possess an internal ache for peace, it seems so many light years away from the world in which we live that we are tempted to relegate it to the world of fantasy. Is peace in our world reserved only for idealistic young people? Is peace in our world such an impossible dream that we must yank back on the reins and only allow ourselves to imagine personal inner peace? Or could it be that peace within our souls can help us create peace within our world?

This morning's passage is the Song of Zechariah. In order to grasp its message, we need some background on Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth. In what sounds like an echo of the Abraham and Sarah story in Genesis, Zechariah and Elizabeth are in their golden years and they have no children. Yet, Elizabeth stuns all the neighbors by announcing that she is with child. Imagine one of our members who lives at Cokesbury calling up her neighbors and saying, "Surprise!"

At the appointed time, Elizabeth gives birth to a son, and on the eighth day the infant is to be named. The custom was to name him after his father, and so everyone expects the child to be named Zechariah. However, Elizabeth creates yet another commotion when she says, "No, that's not going to be his name. We are calling him John."

Her friends protest, "But, there's not a single man in your family named John." They turn to the father and ask Zechariah what he says about the child's name. Now, Zechariah has a

bit of a problem. He cannot speak. Nine months earlier when the angel Gabriel told Zechariah that Elizabeth was pregnant, Zechariah did not believe him. Well, who would? I might have been equally as skeptical, wouldn't you? But because he did not believe Gabriel, the angel said, "You will become mute; unable to speak until after the child is born."

So as the child is about to be named, and Elizabeth insists "It's going to be 'John,' the people ask Zechariah for his decision. Zechariah motions for a writing tablet, and he inscribes on it: "His name is John;" which, by the way, means "God is gracious."

Immediately Zechariah's mouth is opened and he can once more speak, which prompts today's passage, the prophetic Song of Zechariah. He declares to the people that despite the fact that their enemies are oppressing them, God is raising up a savior who will save them. And the son he is holding in his arms – John – will go before him to prepare the people for the savior's coming. And then, in the final two verses, Zechariah says, "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 keep them under their swords, it's clear that Zechariah's declaration of Christ guiding our feet into the way of peace does not refer to an escapist spirituality that focuses solely on peace of mind. Zechariah envisions better living conditions – more food, more freedom, more justice, more mercy. Yet, he does not declare that Christ will unilaterally establish a world at peace. He says that Christ will guide *our* feet into the way of peace. He will show *us* the path that leads to shalom.

Prayer was crucial for Jesus. It allowed him to remain in harmony with God. Our interior life is vital and we need to cultivate it so that we too can experience the peace of God that passes all understanding. However, the way of Christ is not to permanently withdraw from the world in prayer and meditation to embrace an individualistic spirituality. After Jesus spent time isolated in prayer and was filled with God's Spirit, he always marched back into a hurting world to bring health and wholeness to people's lives.

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 prayer which keeps us connected to the only One who can give us serenity in the midst of distress. But having peace in our soul not only helps us weather the personal storms of life, it can also transform the world around us.

Professor and author Gerard Vanderhaar was passionate about peacemaking, and wrote about a critical moment in the Civil Rights movement. In 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr., went to Memphis at the height of the sanitation workers' strike. "Two young black leaders of a group known as the Invaders set up a meeting with him. King's aides were uneasy because the Invaders were angry and bristling for an argument. They wanted drastic action and they thought King was moving too slowly. However, when King appeared, the tense atmosphere changed. One of the Invaders said, 'When he came in the room, it seemed like all of a sudden there was a rush of wind and everything just went out, and peace and calm settled over everything. You could feel peace around that man. I have never seen anyone that looked like peace, but that man looked like peace'."²

Vanderhaar points out that when we're anxious, we communicate our nervousness to others and they become edgy. However, when we are at peace within ourselves, we can have a calming effect on others.

All of us know what it's like to be around someone who makes us feel good; someone who makes us feel happy and positive and cherished. We also know what it's like to be in the presence of someone who is toxic; someone who drags us down and brings out the worst in us.

Senator Russell Long of Louisiana recalled the dirtiest political campaign ever waged against him. He said, "My opponent said some nasty, unverified, undignified, disgusting things about me. Worst of all, much of what he said was true."

What would others say about your impact on them? Do you exude peace and goodwill? Or do you prompt negativity and conflict?

We can make our communities more peaceful by the influences we exert in our personal relationships. If we are intimidating, if we are judgmental, if we are confrontational, we foster dissension. However, if we are kind, calm and cooperative, we radiate peace. Every person we agitate may go on to wound others. Every person we lift up may go on to spread peace.

However, we ought not delude ourselves; the path of peace is rarely easy. It's much easier to let our anger turn into rage than to calm ourselves. It's much easier to seek retribution than to forgive. It's much easier to confront injustice with force and fury than to respond with nonviolence. It's much easier to go the route of "an eye for an eye." But the way of Christ, is the way of peace.

Matt Fitzgerald tells of a gripping photograph he saw in a book on the history of the civil rights movement. It's a photo of a white man and a white woman sitting with an African-American woman at a lunch counter in Nashville. Their backs are turned from an angry mob gathered behind them. The waiter has just poured a bottle of ketchup over the white man's head, and in the black and white photograph, the ketchup looks like blood dripping down the man's jacket. The man sits motionless like a statue. He's fighting back a powerful urge to grab that ketchup bottle and anything else he can get his hands on and strike out against the taunters. However, he remains still.

To many, he appears to be a weakling; a coward who is too afraid to start swinging his fists. But, in fact, he is armed with something extremely powerful; subtle, but powerful: the gospel of peace. He counters their violence with nonviolence.

The eyes of most people in the crowd are insane. One man has a sugar jar in his hand and a smile on his face as he pours its contents over the African-American woman's head. A middle-aged man next to him looks on with approval. But to their right, at the edge of the photograph, there is a member of the mob who looks ashamed of this ugly scene. He is a young man and his eyes are downcast and his face tormented.

It seems obvious that the young man walked through the doors of that restaurant ready to attack, or at least to cheer on the violence. If one of the people at the counter had fought back with force, he would have struck back with pleasure. But his weapons were no match for their peaceful, non-violent response. The photo caught the precise instant when his soul was pierced by the power of peace.

Those three protestors probably did not feel triumphant when they returned to their homes to wash off the day's trauma. God's victories often emerge slowly, over time. They are difficult in the moment, but beautiful in retrospect. There is great power in that photo. It declares: "Though the flaming arrows rage, in the end, they will not be victorious."³

In this morning's passage, Zechariah declares that Christ will guide us in the way of peace. And when Jesus delivers his sermon on the plain, he spells it out. He says, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you." (Luke 6:27-28).

Though darkness often prevails in our world, never stop seeking the light. Though people may hurt, ridicule and abuse you, never give in to their ways. Our way is the way of peace. And in the end, peace will win.

NOTES

1. Gary W. Charles, "Homiletical Perspective," *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 1, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p.5.
2. Gerard A. Vanderhaar, "And Let It Begin with Me," in *The Living Pulpit*, October-December, 2006, p.18.
3. Matt Fitzgerald, "Reflections on the Lectionary," *Christian Century*, August 11, 2009.